



# Theresa

Orlan Orphans, Book 14

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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# Theresa

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At the Altar Book 14



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## One

THERESA SANDERS SWUNG a bag of books over her shoulder and walked out the front door of the Sanders' house. It was a crisp fall day in Nowhere. Leaves from the trees had begun to turn orange and red, drifting to the ground. Theresa hurried away from the house and toward Main Street.

Now that she had finished her own education, she had taken a job assisting the teacher at Nowhere's local schoolhouse. Her parents, Edna Petunia and Cletus Sanders, who had adopted Theresa and her fourteen sisters, had a rule that all of their daughters needed to either find a job or work around the house while they lived in the family home.

Theresa loved having a job. Each morning, she arrived promptly at seven o'clock to sharpen pencils, clap the erasers to clean them of chalk dust, and prepare the books and papers for the day's lessons. She had the small building to herself, and if there was extra time, she would sit and read quietly as she waited for the teacher and students to arrive.

As Theresa walked, she reflected on how lucky she was to lead such a comfortable life in Nowhere. Theresa didn't remember anything about her early childhood. She knew that at some point, both her mother and father had perished, leaving her to be raised in an orphanage in Orlan, New York. The people running the orphanage had separated the male and female children when Theresa was a young girl. She, the fourteen other female orphans, and their matron, Cassie, had been sent to Texas on a school bus. When they'd arrived, however, they'd learned that there'd been a terrible mix-up. There was no home for fifteen female orphans.

Theresa recalled how frightened she'd been when she worried she would be separated from the girls she considered her sisters.. They had grown close in the orphanage and truly cared for one another, and they didn't know a soul in Nowhere outside of each other and Cassie, along with her husband, Valentino.

Then Edna Petunia and Cletus Sanders, an eccentric, wealthy couple, had stepped in. They offered to provide a home for all fifteen girls. Since Edna Petunia and Cletus hadn't found each other until Edna Petunia was well past her child-bearing days, they had felt that their marriage, though quite strong, was lacking something.

Soon, the laughter of the Orlan orphans filled Edna Petunia and Cletus's large, comfortable home. In no time at all, many of Theresa's older sisters had fallen for some of Nowhere's eligible bachelors. One by one, they had married and even started to have children of their own. These days, Theresa found it hard to count the number of nieces and nephews she had. With each passing month, the family seemed to get bigger and bigger.

Theresa and her younger sister, Katie, were the only two Sanders sisters who had not been paired off. Theresa wasn't sure if she would ever want to get married. She didn't say anything disparaging because she didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings, but privately, she thought marriage sounded like an awful lot of work. She enjoyed her life exactly the way it was.

There were times that she wondered what having a family might be like, especially when she saw her sisters playing with their infants. They seemed so happy and fulfilled. It reminded Theresa of the joy she got when she helped the students in the classroom. For now, that was enough. Maybe one day she would meet a man who interested her enough to consider starting a family—but as far as Theresa was concerned, that day was far away.

As Theresa approached the one-room schoolhouse, she noticed something odd. She heard a strange, high-pitched noise that seemed to be coming from the front door. As she got closer, she saw a large, wiry basket perched on the steps to the schoolhouse.

Theresa frowned. Miss Carroll, the schoolteacher, hadn't mentioned that she was expecting any packages. Theresa walked up to the basket. It seemed to be filled with old, dirty rags. Theresa looked around. Who could have left such a strange item on the steps to the school? Was this some prank by the mischievous older boys?

Theresa bent down to pick up the basket and set it aside so she could enter the building, but as she leaned down, she heard the high-pitched wailing again. Theresa peered down into the basket and gaped at what she saw. Nestled firmly into the dirty rags were two wailing infants!

Theresa couldn't believe her eyes. Instinctively, she touched her hand to each baby's forehead, making sure they weren't overheated in the hot sun. Each baby seemed cool to the touch. Whoever had dropped off the basket likely hadn't gone far. But who would leave two helpless babies on the steps of the schoolhouse?

One of the babies began crying even louder than before. Theresa realized the poor child must be hungry. She couldn't tell whether the babies were girls, boys, or one of each. There would be time for that later. First, she had to figure out how to get them food.

Theresa knew from her experience with her sisters' children that

these babies were no more than a few days old. They needed milk, but she had no idea where to find the babies' mother. Suddenly, Theresa realized there was a scrap of paper on the steps, poking out from beneath the basket. She pulled it out and read it quickly.

*Dear Schoolteacher,*

*I am devastated to leave my babies on your doorstep. I love them so much, and it is because I love them that I must leave them with you. You will feed them, clothe them, bathe them, and educate them. You will provide for them in ways I never could. I am a young girl who made poor decisions, and now the children's father has run off, leaving me unwed and penniless, unable to care for my babies. I trust that God will watch over my babies and ensure their safety and happiness.*

*I am eternally grateful to you,*

*A Loving Mother*

Theresa read and re-read the note to make sure she understood it. She could not imagine how difficult it must be to leave your newborn children wrapped up for a stranger to take inside. Although she couldn't fathom herself in that situation, she felt sorrow for the young mother who would never know her children.

The baby began crying louder, and Theresa knew she had to leave. She pulled a pen out of her bag, turned the letter over, and wrote her own note on the back.

*Miss Carroll—*

*There is an urgent matter I must attend to. I will be back before lunch.*

*-Theresa Sanders*

Theresa looked at the babies, unsure of what to do next. She knew she needed to go into town to find some food for the babies. She knew that at this age, all they would take was their mother's milk, but she would have to figure out something else until the mother was located. Surely someone from the church would take pity on a young, unwed mother and her twin infants.

In that moment, Theresa decided she would do whatever it took to find the mother of the infants and return the babies. She would work with Edna Petunia and Cletus to find a way to make a donation to the mother so the babies wouldn't want for anything. But in the meantime, she had to find a way to feed them.

Theresa picked up the basket and took a few awkward steps away from the schoolhouse. Although each infant couldn't have weighed more than four or five pounds, carrying both of them in the basket made Theresa feel ungainly, like she was going to fall at any moment. She set the basket down in the dirt and thought about it.

Very carefully, Theresa threaded the strap of the basket through one of the loops on her bag. She scooped one infant up with her left hand, cradling the child to her left bosom. With her right, she brought

the other child up on the other side. She tried to put the bag and basket combination onto her back, but she realized she had run out of hands. Theresa let out a frustrated sigh.

She realized that she didn't really need her bag of school supplies. She could leave it on the porch while she made the trip into town. Theresa set the babies back down into the basket, detached the bag from the basket, and set the bag on the steps along with her note for Miss Carroll. Next, Theresa lifted each baby again and cradled them both to her chest. Using her left arm to grasp the babies, she swung her right arm through the basket's handle.

Finally, Theresa stood upright, adjusting so there was one baby in each hand. She took a few slow, faltering steps, then found an easier rhythm. She was walking much slower than usual, but at this rate, she would at least make it to downtown Nowhere in a reasonable amount of time.

As Theresa walked, she rocked the babies, hoping they'd quiet. When the buildings of Main Street appeared in the distance, she heard a familiar lullaby and wondered where it was coming from. A few seconds later, she realized that she had started to hum a familiar childhood song to soothe the babies without even being aware of what she was doing.

Theresa decided her first stop would be the town mercantile. Not only were the owners her sister and brother-in-law, Ruby and Lewis Darcy, but they were also the proud parents to a set of twins. Ruby was also a twin herself. Theresa knew they would be able to help her.

The mercantile wasn't open until eight, but Theresa knew that Ruby and Lewis often came to the shop early to clean and prepare for the day. She wanted to knock on the door so someone would come let her in, but once again, she didn't have a spare hand. She set the basket down gently and nestled each baby into it on the ground, then knocked on the door.

Ruby came to the entrance, peering at Theresa through the glass door. She opened the door with a quizzical expression. "Hi, Theresa! It's good to see you—but what are you doing here today?"

Theresa had helped out at the mercantile a few days per week before getting her job at the schoolhouse, but that had ended months ago. She hadn't visited the mercantile during the day in a long time.

Just then, one of the babies began to cry again, and Ruby looked down at the basket. "Oh, my goodness!" Ruby cried. "Whose babies are these?"

Theresa shrugged. "That's what I'm trying to figure out."

Hearing the commotion, Lewis came to the door. "What's going on out here?"

"Come on in!" Ruby said hurriedly. "Oh, these sweet little babes!"



Theresa picked up the basket and lugged it inside. With Lewis's help, she heaved the basket onto the counter of the mercantile. "These babies were left on the steps of the schoolhouse with a note saying the mother couldn't afford to take care of them. They seem very young—I don't know the last time they ate. Do you know how we can feed them?"

Ruby thought for a long moment. "I have an idea. But I have no idea of whether it will work or not."

Lewis looked at the babies warily. "You're not going to feed them here, are you? I don't know if that would be good for business."

One of the babies began crying again, and Theresa picked the child up. Just then, there was a loud rapping noise at the door.

Ruby rushed up the stairs to the section of the mercantile, where the Darcy family lived. "I'll be right back."

Now both babies were crying. Lewis tried to quiet the baby that was still in the basket. "Do you mind answering the door?" Lewis asked since Theresa was closer.

Theresa walked to the front of the store and saw a handsome young man in a straw hat standing outside. He flashed a blinding grin when he saw her.

Theresa opened the door cautiously.

"Good day, ma'am," the man said in a hushed voice, not wanting to disturb the baby. "I'm Cody Witherspoon, and I'd like to talk to your husband about his insurance policy." He nodded toward Lewis, who was making faces at the other baby in the back.

Theresa blushed. "Oh, he's not my husband. He's my brother-in-law."

Cody looked back and forth between Theresa, Lewis, and the babies, seeming puzzled, but recovered quickly. "I can see you've got your hands full, so I won't trouble you any further. But I'd like to leave my card with you. I'll come again at a better time." Cody reached into the leather briefcase he carried and pulled out a small card with an ornate imprint on it.

Theresa reached her hand out to accept it. As her hand touched his, she felt a jolt that coursed through her entire body, robbing her of breath for a moment. She sucked air in through her nose, trying to calm herself. She had never had such an experience before. "I'm Theresa," she managed to squeak through her nerves.

Cody seemed to feel it, too. He stared at her with a lascivious grin on his face, as if seeing her for the first time.

"Thank you, Mr. Witherspoon." Theresa slammed the door in his face, wanting to forget about this odd encounter with a stranger and get back to the matter at hand—feeding the babies.

She walked back to the counter, still rocking the baby she held,

who was quieter now.

“What was that about?” Lewis asked, rubbing the foot of the baby in front of him, who seemed like he or she was nodding off to sleep.

“He wanted to talk to you about insurance,” Theresa explained. She handed Lewis the card. “He said he’d be back.”

Lewis sighed. “I’m sure he will. Some of these traveling salesmen are so persistent.”

Ruby came back in with two baby bottles in her hands. Each bottle had a narrow opening at the top. “Let’s see if this will work.” She held one bottle out to Theresa and kept the other one for herself. “I mixed up some infant food. I hope they’ll drink it.”

Theresa lifted the bottle and held it near the baby’s mouth. She tilted it so the baby could latch onto the opening to the bottle. The baby barely seemed to notice.

Ruby’s baby began drinking happily from her bottle. Theresa looked on in frustration. “Just be patient, Theresa,” Ruby assured.

Theresa tried positioning the bottle a little differently. It was hard to hold a baby and a bottle at the same time. Finally, the baby quieted and began drinking, too.

Once Ruby’s baby had finished, the child began wailing again. Ruby looked surprised. “Hm. I would have thought you’d be happy that you got some food!” She held the baby up and patted the bottom of the baby’s tattered dressing gown. “Oh!” A look of realization flickered across her face. Ruby laughed. “I’ll be right back.” She held the baby slightly away from her body and went back into the living quarters.

Lewis was confused. “What just happened?”

“I don’t know. But this baby doesn’t seem very happy either.” Theresa noticed that after the baby had stopped drinking from the bottle, the child had begun to cry again.

Ruby reappeared after a few minutes. “Poor thing,” she cooed. “I’ll help you, too.” She handed Lewis the baby she’d been holding and picked up the other one. “I’ve solved one mystery. That one’s a boy!” Ruby pointed to the child in Lewis’s arms. “Follow me, Theresa.”

Theresa was confused, but she followed Ruby.

Ruby led her upstairs into the living quarters and set the baby down on the floor. “You remember how to change a diaper, right?”

Theresa flushed and nodded. She’d helped to care for many of her sisters’ babies, so she had changed more diapers than she could count. But somehow, this felt different.

Ruby helped Theresa change the baby’s diaper. Theresa smiled when the task was complete. “And this one’s a girl!” Theresa bit her lip and thought for a moment. “I know we’ll need to return them eventually, but do you think we should give them names?”

Ruby's smile faltered for a moment, but she recovered quickly. "That's not a bad idea. I don't want you to be disappointed or hurt when you have to give the babies back."

"I'm sure I won't," Theresa assured her. The women walked downstairs with the baby girl. Theresa stared at the babies for a long time. "I'm going to name you Faith, and your brother's going to be Gabriel."

Lewis looked up in surprise. "You're naming the babies? Make sure you don't get too attached."

Theresa smiled. "I won't. But I will take good care of them until we can find their mother."

## TWO

DINNER AT THE SANDERS' house was filled with wailing, rocking the babies back and forth, and bottles of milk. Edna Petunia put a hand to her temple and winced. "I have a splitting headache." She unscrewed the lid of her flask, where she kept her cough syrup.

Theresa suspected there was something stronger than cough syrup inside but would never dream of challenging the older woman on it. Edna Petunia had been through enough in her lifetime—heartbreak when her betrothed died just before their wedding, years of solitude and hard work, and taking in fifteen orphans. Theresa and her sisters weren't about to give her a hard time if she had an unconventional coping mechanism.

"I don't understand," Cletus repeated. "Where did these infernal creatures come from?"

Theresa felt a rush of emotion as she defended the babies. "I know they're crying, but they're probably scared, Cletus! They're not infernal creatures, they're Faith and Gabriel."

"But where did they come from?" Cletus raised his voice so he could be heard above the babies' cries.

Katie giggled as she cuddled Faith closer. "Who cares where they came from? They're adorable! Can we keep them?"

Edna Petunia clapped a hand over Cletus's mouth before he could shout his response. His face got redder and redder. "Please, Cletus, don't be unkind. They're little bastards, that's all. Just like our girls."

Theresa walked over to the side of the table and picked up her fork. She speared a bite of the pot roast Edna Petunia had made and put it in her mouth as she balanced Gabriel with her other arm. The family had been seated for half an hour, but she had only been able to take a few bites. "We can ask if anyone knows who their mother is at church this week."

"What about Dr. Harvey?" Edna Petunia suggested. "If those babies were birthed by a doctor, it would have to be Dr. Harvey or Dr. Bennett." Dr. Iris Harvey was a dear friend of Edna Petunia's from when they lived in Seattle. The only other doctor in town, Dr. Stephen Bennett, was not only Dr. Harvey's nephew, but was also married to Hope, one of Theresa's sisters.

"That's a great idea!" Theresa exclaimed.

Katie scowled. "I don't want to give them back. Their mother gave

them away. She didn't want them in the first place!"

"She left a note and said she wasn't able to care for them. She was looking out for them. Maybe someone from her family can help," Theresa explained.

Edna Petunia removed her hand from Cletus's mouth, and Cletus sighed. "As long as they're not living under my roof. I'm too old for a pair of babies."

Theresa cradled Gabriel, rocking him back and forth, and he quieted. She breathed a sigh of relief. Soon, Faith fell asleep, and she quieted, too. "There. They're not so bad, are they?"

Cletus shook his head sternly. "They're not staying here, Theresa."

Edna Petunia tugged on Cletus's arm. "At least allow them to stay through the week, Cletus. We'll speak to everyone at church about it this Sunday. But let's give them a safe home for a few days. Please, sweetheart?"

Cletus exhaled loudly. Everyone knew that he was unable to tell Edna Petunia no. "Fine. But by Sunday, these babies need to be out of here."

"Hooray!" Edna Petunia cried.

"I'm so happy!" Katie whispered so she wouldn't wake either baby.

"Thank you, Cletus!" Theresa carefully walked over to him and kissed him on the head. She had five days to find the baby's parents. How hard could it be?

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THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Katie went to the schoolhouse to work in Theresa's place. Katie still helped out around the house. She hadn't yet found a job outside of the home, and this would be a good way for her to see if she liked working at the school.

Edna Petunia had errands to run in Nowhere, so Cletus took her in the family wagon on his way to work. As town judge, Cletus had his own office and an associate lawyer who happened to be one of his sons-in-law.

Theresa busied herself with feeding the babies breakfast. When one baby finished, she had to start feeding the other one, and soon both were cranky and crying. Theresa sighed. Her eyelids felt heavy, like she couldn't keep them open for much longer.

Lewis had dropped off two cribs the night before, so the babies at least had a more comfortable place to sleep than the basket Theresa had found them in. Theresa had set them up in the formal parlor and had tried to rest on the sofa as they slept in the cribs. Unfortunately, the babies had fussed almost the entire night. Every time Theresa had drifted off, she had been jolted awake moments later by either Faith

or Gabriel.

Still, Theresa had to admit that they were adorable. As she thought about giving them back to their family members, she felt a twinge of grief. Part of her was still thinking about what Katie had suggested the night before. Could they really keep the babies?

Theresa shook her head. That was a silly idea. She was a young, unmarried woman who lived with her elderly parents. She couldn't take in two babies!

Just then, Theresa was startled by a knock at the door. She furrowed her brow, wondering who would be calling at this hour. Maybe one of her sisters had found out that there were two babies in the house and wanted to visit.

Theresa set Gabriel down in his crib to free her hands. But Faith began to cry, so Theresa picked her up from her crib on her way to the door. "Sh—it's okay, Faith." Theresa tried to soothe the child, but Faith just screamed. Theresa gently opened the door.

Instead of one of her sisters, Theresa was shocked to see Cody Witherspoon at the door! She felt the same spark of electricity when she saw him at her doorstep. "What are you doing here?"

"What are you doing here?" Cody Witherspoon repeated. He immediately flushed. What was it about this young woman that made him so flummoxed? He had been traveling door to door as an insurance salesman for years. He was always quick with a joke or polite comment. But in front of Theresa, he became a stammering mess.

Theresa laughed, put at ease by Cody's surprise. "I live here. How can I help you?"

Cody realized that Theresa was holding a crying baby. He smiled at the infant, and put a hand out to pat the child on the back. Miraculously, the baby stopped wailing.

Theresa breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh, thank goodness. I do need to get back to check on her brother, though—he's in the other room. I'm sorry, Mr. Witherspoon. Can you come back another time?"

Cody began to nod, but then he had a better idea. "You seem like you have your hands full. Why don't I come in and lend you one? A hand, I mean." Cody felt so silly. He couldn't string together sentences the way he usually could. Theresa made him nervous.

Theresa thought about it for a moment. Normally, she would never have let a strange man come into the house while she was alone. But she had a good feeling about Cody Witherspoon, and she was exhausted from lack of sleep. So she held the door open wider. "Follow me."

Back in the formal parlor, Cody picked up Gabriel and soothed him, bouncing him up and down against his chest. Gabriel began to

coo.

Theresa watched in wonder. "You're a natural! How do you know what babies like?"

Cody shrugged modestly as he continued to hold Gabriel. "I was the oldest of four boys. You learn how to rock a baby."

"Thank you," Theresa sighed. In her arms, Faith continued to fuss.

Cody waited until Gabriel had been quiet for a few moments, then looked at the cribs. "Which one is his?"

Theresa pointed. "That one is Gabriel's crib. This one is for Faith."

Cody set Gabriel down in his crib. He walked over to Theresa and gestured at Faith. "May I?"

Theresa nodded.

Cody took the baby from her arms, brushing Theresa's arm with his fingertips. Theresa felt a throb pulse through her body as Cody touched her. It was unlike anything she had ever dreamed of, and she found herself wanting to be closer to him.

Cody turned, walking back and forth with Faith to soothe her. Theresa fanned her face, which she was sure must be on fire.

Once she had calmed down, she remembered her question from earlier. "What are you doing here?"

Cody turned back and smiled. "I'm so sorry! How impolite of me. I came here to see the man of the house. I'd venture to guess he isn't home?"

Theresa shook her head. "No, he isn't. I can tell him you stopped by. Is this about insurance?"

Cody smiled. "You remembered." In addition to being beautiful, she was sharp, too.

Suddenly, Theresa became aware that a grown businessman was in her formal parlor, rocking babies to sleep instead of fulfilling the duties of his job. "Thank you so much for your help with the babies, but I don't want to interfere with your work. I'll tell Cletus you were here."

"Thank you, Theresa. Cletus is your husband, I'm assuming?" Cody sighed. The best women were always taken.

Theresa laughed. "No. He's my father!"

Cody looked back and forth between the babies and Theresa. He remembered that the man from the mercantile was her brother-in-law. "I'm so confused."

"Oh!" Theresa realized what he thought. "These babies aren't mine, if that's what you're wondering."

Cody felt a glimmer of hope. "Are you even married?"

Theresa shook her head. "No, I'm not. Just taking care of these babies until someone claims them." She explained the whole story to Cody, from how she found them to how she had ended up in Nowhere

in the first place.

By the end of her story, Cody was hanging onto her every word. He didn't want to leave. He could listen to this woman talk all day.

"Enough about me," Theresa said. "What about you?"

Cody sighed. "Nothing as interesting as all that!"

"I'd still like to hear about it," Theresa told him. She knew he had more work to do, but she selfishly hoped he'd stay for the rest of the morning. Maybe she could even convince him to stay for lunch.

"I was born in a small town in Pennsylvania," Cody explained. "My parents had a shipping business, and I planned to take it over when I was old enough to do so. But then, their building was destroyed in a terrible fire. Our family was ruined."

"Oh, no! I'm sorry to hear that," Theresa cried. She felt so sorry for Cody and his family.

"It taught me a lot. We were lucky that we only lost money. My parents and brothers were unhurt," Cody continued. "But that's why I'm in the insurance business. I want to make sure that everyone's houses and farms and other properties are protected in case of an unthinkable accident or storm."

Theresa nodded. "That makes sense. I don't know much about insurance."

"It involves a lot of paperwork," Cody admitted. "But the best part is when I get to go around and meet new people. People like you."

Theresa blushed and looked down at the floor. From her crib, Faith began to fuss again. She picked the baby up and rocked her back and forth gently. "That does sound interesting."

"I think the baby has taken to you, Theresa," Cody commented. He saw how natural the child looked on Theresa's arm.

"I wish I could keep them," Theresa confessed. She hadn't meant to say it out loud, but she was so exhausted, the words tumbled right out.

Cody nodded solemnly. "I can see why you'd want to do that."

Theresa forced a pained smile. "But I can't. A single woman can't raise two babies on her own. Especially when they're not even her children."

"But a couple could," Cody said, standing up and walking over to her.

"Of course," Theresa agreed. "That would be a wonderful family for the babies."

Cody stroked Faith's back gently. "A couple . . . like us."

Theresa's heart thudded in her chest. "Us?"

"I know this must sound crazy because we just met. But Theresa, you're the most wonderful woman I've ever encountered. I think that this was meant to be. Theresa Sanders, will you marry me?" Cody



looked at Theresa earnestly, hoping for the answer he so fervently desired.

Theresa couldn't believe what was happening, but she wanted it more than anything else. She bobbed her head up and down excitedly. "Yes, Cody! I will!"

Cody picked Theresa up, even though she was still carrying Faith, and twirled them around. Then he set her down and picked up Gabriel. "Welcome to your new family," Cody whispered.

Theresa beamed happily. She knew they were rushing into things, but this felt right.

A million questions raced through Cody's mind. What had he just done? Where would they live? Would his salary feed two tiny infants? What if the real parents of the twins decided to come back for them? What if he and Theresa weren't actually compatible? Although he was scared, he also felt strongly about Theresa. If he hadn't, he wouldn't have asked for her hand in marriage.

Still holding Gabriel, Cody leaned in closer and pressed his lips against Theresa's.

Cody's lips lingered against Theresa's own, pushing and pulling until her entire body was flushed with desire.

"What is the meaning of this?" Edna Petunia squawked.

Theresa and Cody spun around. They set the babies down in the cribs and looked at each other happily. "This is Cody Witherspoon. My fiancé!" Theresa said proudly.

Edna Petunia put her hands on her hips. "Excuse me? I don't know this man from a cowpoke on the side of the stable!"

Theresa shook her head, confused. She could tell from Edna Petunia's tone that the situation was a bad thing, but the expressions the older woman used were confusing.

Cody held up his hands innocently. "I'm sorry if I've created a situation. My emotions got the best of me. I should have asked you and your husband for Theresa's hand in marriage."

"But do you even know each other?" Edna Petunia grumbled.

Theresa looked at Cody and smiled. "I know enough."

Cody grinned. "I do, too."

Edna Petunia looked back and forth at the two young people. "Mr. Witherspoon, you should leave. My daughter is sleep-deprived and exhausted. She doesn't know what she's saying. That means you're not really engaged."

Cody looked at Theresa, and Theresa nodded. "It's true that I didn't sleep last night. But I meant it when I said I would marry you."

"Maybe I should leave," Cody said softly.

"Yes, you should." Edna Petunia stood firm.

"Come back," Theresa whispered as one of the babies began to cry.

“I will,” Cody promised as he walked toward the door.

Theresa felt all of the emotions and exhaustion of the past day wash over her, and her eyes pricked with tears. As they rolled down her cheeks, Edna Petunia walked to her and held her close. “There, there. It will all be all right, dear. I’m sure everything will work out as it’s meant to be.”

## Three

*“Wahhhh!”* Faith’s shrill cry interrupted Theresa from a fitful sleep. Or was it Gabriel? Theresa rubbed her eyes, trying to figure out which twin was crying. She was so exhausted these days, she could hardly tell them apart.

It had been five days since Cody’s surprise proposal, and his visit seemed like nothing more than a dream to Theresa. That evening, Cletus and Edna Petunia had given her a stern talk in the living room since the formal parlor was occupied by the twins. Since then, they’d left Theresa alone.

Theresa was so sleep-deprived she wondered if she’d dreamed the whole thing. After all, what kind of man would be willing to marry a woman he didn’t know and become a father to two wailing babies? It made no sense.

As much as Theresa wanted Cody to visit as he’d promised, she had the feeling that she would never see him again. She had made peace with that—or at least, she thought she had. Sometimes, as she rocked Gabriel to sleep or read a children’s book to Faith, she imagined what it would be like to have Cody by her side. As soon as the thoughts came over her, she tried to vanquish them, but it didn’t always work.

Still, Theresa had plenty to do. It seemed that the twins went through clothing and milk faster than anything she’d ever seen before. Even Ruby, who made frequent visits to the Sanders’ home, said the twins ate more than any baby she had ever seen. Ruby had seen a lot of babies—she had seven children of her own, including two sets of twins, plus two stepsons, and she had helped several of her sisters with their babies.

Theresa didn’t care how much they ate or cried or went through clothes, she just wanted to make sure they were healthy. Dr. Harvey had inspected both Faith and Gabriel carefully and declared that they were both in fine condition. Neither Dr. Harvey nor Dr. Bennett had delivered the babies or taken care of a pregnant young woman who could have been their mother.

Theresa sighed. She knew that she would eventually have to say goodbye to the twins, but she hated to think about it. It was finally Sunday, the day they would announce in church that the babies had been found and needed to be returned to their family. She had secretly dreaded this day all week, hoping that some alternative would present

itself before Sunday.

But no one had said anything about the babies. A part of Theresa wanted the mother not to be found so she could keep them for herself, but she knew that wasn't kind. She prayed for the children's mother to be found and for her to have the support to raise her children well.

Soon, Cletus and Edna Petunia came into the formal parlor. "It's Sunday!" Cletus said, straightening his tie. "You know what that means. These babies will have to take their screaming elsewhere, and I will be free to sit in my chair again!" He looked longingly at his overstuffed armchair, where Theresa was feeding Gabriel.

"I'm sorry, Cletus," Theresa said. "It won't be long now." She stared down at baby Gabriel's tiny, perfect button nose. She knew she would have to say goodbye to it eventually. Was it so wrong to hope for a few more days with the babies?

Katie came downstairs and helped Theresa dress both babies for church. In a family with fifteen daughters and constantly growing numbers of grandchildren, there was no shortage of baby clothes. Theresa tied a delicate yellow bonnet around Faith's chin and stood back, admiring the beautiful child.

"If they were my babies, I would never have left them on a doorstep!" Katie exclaimed.

"Now, now," Theresa chided. "We don't know the position their mother was in. I'm sure she did what she thought was right."

"I hope we find her! That would be so nice, and I'm sure the babies would be so happy!" Katie said cheerily.

Theresa's eyes narrowed. "I thought you wanted to keep the babies."

Katie frowned. "They cry an awful lot."

"So did you when you were younger!" Theresa retorted.

"That's not very nice," Katie said with a hurt tone.

"Girls! Stop with your tomfoolery. It's time for church!" Cletus called from the kitchen.

Theresa sighed. Once again, she had no time for breakfast. Ever since she had brought the twins home, she had barely had a moment to eat, dress, or wash. She finally understood what her sisters had gone through when they'd had their babies, especially Ruby and Opal, who each had a set of twins.

Edna Petunia helped Theresa into the wagon with the twins. She carried them in a beautiful bassinette that her sister Dorothy had given her, adorned with ribbons. It was bigger and easier to carry than the basket she had found the twins in, and it seemed like it was more comfortable for the babies. Edna Petunia cooed as she tucked each twin under a set of blankets. "Aren't you a sweet little bastard? Yes, you are!"

Katie squealed. “Edna Petunia, I don’t know if you should say that when we get to church!”

Edna Petunia waved her hand. “It’s the truth! They’re little bastards!”

Katie looked at Theresa, and despite her exhaustion, Theresa burst out laughing. Her family was peculiar, but they were all hers. She was glad she had found such a loving home. She only hoped that the babies would have the same chance she had.

When they arrived at church, all of the Sanders sisters crowded around Theresa. Everyone asked questions about the twins. What were they eating? How were they sleeping? How could she tell them apart?

“Enough about the babies!” Cletus cried. “We are here for church!”

As Cletus was talking, Gabriel reached out a tiny hand and brushed the side of Cletus’s face. Cletus’s expression softened.

“See? Isn’t he sweet?” Theresa grinned.

Cletus shook his head vigorously. “I’m not saying he’s not adorable. But he needs to get out of my house—soon!”

Theresa sighed. She silently hoped Cletus would change his mind.

The family filed into the church and took their seats. The Sanders family, including the daughters, their husbands, and their children, filled several rows of seats.

At the front of the church, Pastor Micah Barton began to preach. Micah was married to Sarah Jane, one of Theresa’s older sisters. Theresa scanned the church to find Chrissy, Sarah Jane and Micah’s oldest child. After Chrissy was orphaned, she had captured Sarah Jane’s and Micah’s hearts before they were even married. They’d quickly wed in order to officially adopt her.

As Micah spoke, Theresa daydreamed about marrying Cody. She knew it was an impossible situation, but she couldn’t stop thinking about it. If she closed her eyes, she could still feel his warm breath on her face and the electric way he made her body feel.

At the end of the service, Micah held up a hand. “I have one more announcement. We have twin babies who were left on the steps of the schoolhouse.” He gestured toward Theresa, who was holding both babies, rocking them back and forth.

A hush fell over the churchgoers. People turned and stared at Theresa and the babies, then started to whisper.

Micah cleared his throat. “If anyone has any information about the babies, especially who their parents are, please come forward. We would like to return the twins to their family. In the meantime, the Sanders family has provided them a safe and loving home.”

Theresa’s heart beat faster as she looked around the church. One of these families could claim the babies, and she may never hold them again. She clutched them a little tighter. Even though they weren’t her

own flesh and blood, she felt a sense of ownership for the babies. She knew she would do anything to protect them.

"If anyone knows anything at all, please let us know so we can seek out the family and make sure the twins have a good home to go to. If we can't locate the parents, they may need to be adopted by good families. Thank you," Micah concluded his speech.

Theresa's head spun. She wasn't sure if it was the lack of sleep or the stress she felt from being the center of attention, but she was confused by Micah's words. "Good families?" Theresa whispered to Edna Petunia as the congregation began to leave the church.

Edna Petunia nodded. "Just like when you arrived in Nowhere. They thought they'd have to split all of you bastards up."

"Sh, Edna Petunia!" Katie giggled.

"It's the truth!" Edna Petunia said indignantly.

Theresa's face fell. "They can't split the twins up. They just *can't*."

"There, there, Theresa." Edna Petunia pulled a peppermint stick out of her bosom. "Have a candy. It will cheer you up."

Theresa shook her head. "No, thank you." She was sad, but she wasn't so inconsolable that she would consider eating something that had been in Edna Petunia's cleavage.

"I'm sure it will all work out," Edna Petunia assured Theresa.

Theresa sighed. She hoped her adoptive mother was right.

Outside, the other churchgoers gathered around Theresa and peppered her with questions about the babies. She tried to answer the questions as best she could.

As she smiled and talked to the townspeople, Theresa felt a prickle of anticipation on her skin.

Cody Witherspoon walked up to Theresa and lifted his hand to hold onto Faith's tiny fingers. "Hello, little darling. And you, too, Faith," Cody said.

Theresa blushed and stared at the ground. Cody was being so forward—there were so many people around! A few feet away, an older woman who was watching Theresa closely looked away. Theresa wondered if she had heard what Cody had whispered into her ear.

Cody sensed Theresa's anxiety and stepped backward. "Don't worry, Theresa. I'll respect your parents' wishes," Cody said softly. In an instant, he slipped backward and away from the crowd.

Theresa felt her anticipation turn to disappointment. Edna Petunia watched sternly, shaking her head. "That young man had better watch himself."

Theresa turned her attention back to her fellow churchgoers. She patiently waited and politely answered their questions, but she thought of Cody the entire time and wondered if she'd ever get to see him again. She was surprised that he had been at church—she would

have expected he would have moved onto the next town by now.

Once the crowd had disappeared, Cletus helped Theresa into the wagon. Although Cletus and Edna Petunia looked disappointed, Theresa was secretly happy. They had learned no new information about the babies. No one knew any young woman who had recently been pregnant, much less anyone who had given birth to twins. One of the older men suggested that maybe it had been someone passing through town on a journey to a different city.

Cletus shrugged as he prepared the wagon to return to the Sanders' home. "I guess we'll need to look into adoption if no one comes forward to claim those little squealers."

"Cletus!" Katie scolded.

Theresa nodded sadly. "Yes, I understand. But haven't you thought about what might happen if . . ."

"What might happen if what?" Edna Petunia turned to face Theresa sharply.

"Nothing," Theresa sighed. She wasn't ready to explain her plan to Edna Petunia and Cletus. She was sure they wouldn't agree to letting her adopt the babies and continue to stay in their house. And they definitely wouldn't allow her to marry Cody and move in with him.

Theresa held the babies' bassinet close as the wagon barreled along the road back to the Sanders' home. A tear trickled down her cheek as she imagined having to say goodbye to the babies. Edna Petunia said that everything would work out. But was she right?

## Four

LUCILLE WINCHESTER PULLED her sweater around her thin, frail bones. "I'm not sure we have room for you, sir."

Cody Witherspoon flashed his biggest, friendliest smile. "I can pay cash in advance, ma'am. You'd be doing me a big kindness."

After a long pause, Mrs. Winchester nodded. "This is only temporary. I don't take permanent boarders."

Lucille was one of the few people in Nowhere who took on boarders, but she was skeptical of the handsome young salesman. She had heard that he had visited several of the businesses and residents of Nowhere to sell them insurance, and she wasn't sure why he was still hanging around.

At eighty years old, Lucille had seen and heard it all. She was used to salesmen traveling to Nowhere, staying for a few days, and then moving on. Although Cody seemed friendly enough, Lucille didn't trust him one bit.

Nevertheless, times had been tough lately, and she hadn't had many opportunities to take on a boarder. This insurance man would just have to do.

Again, Cody flashed a wide smile. "Thank you very much, ma'am." He began to count out crisp bills.

Lucille had to admit, she was impressed by a man who could pay two weeks' rent in advance. She slid the money off the countertop and into her locked box. She handed Cody a key. "Go up the stairs, and it's the second room on your left."

Cody nodded gratefully and walked over to the stairwell, carrying his briefcase and a garment bag carrying his only other suit. He only owned two, but he wore a suit each day, which made for quite a bit of laundry to do.

At the top of the stairs, Cody walked to the second room on his left and inserted the key into the door. The lock clicked, and the door swung open. The room was neat and tidy, with a large quilt spread across a twin bed. At six foot two, Cody hoped his lanky frame would fit on the bed.

Although his boss had given him strict orders to move onto the next town, Cody had sent him a telegraph telling him he needed to stay to close a few more accounts. Although he knew he could sell more policies, there was another, deeper reason that was keeping him



in Nowhere—and her name was Theresa Sanders.

Since he'd met her, he'd been drawn to her, and each time he saw her, his love for her only intensified. He had to make her his wife.

Cody sat down on the bed and thought about his plan. He didn't have much time. In only a few days' time, his boss would get impatient and he would have to move on. With any luck, he'd be moving on with a wife and two children in tow.

Cody sighed. He couldn't get ahead of himself. There was a lot standing in his way. For one thing, the babies didn't belong to Theresa. Someone could claim them and take them away from her. Theresa would be devastated, but Cody would do his best to comfort her.

For another, her parents seemed to hate him. In addition to Edna Petunia's disapproval of his proposal, Cletus Sanders had avoided him at church and also hadn't taken his sales call at his office. Cody had heard that Cletus was a fair and honest judge, but that he had a bit of a temper when it came to his daughters.

Cody knew that if he could get at least ten minutes of Cletus's time, he could prove to the man that Cody was worthy of Theresa. But so far, it seemed Judge Sanders was avoiding him.

Finally, there was the problem of his nomadic lifestyle. He loved Theresa and wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of his life with her. But he also enjoyed his job. It was well-paying and fulfilling, and he had studied for a long time to do this work. He appreciated helping others, and his job made that possible. But it involved travel almost every week of the year. How could he ask Theresa to give up living near her family to go on the road with him? And even if they were able to keep the babies, how could they travel with them?

Cody felt glum as he considered all of the possibilities. He decided to make plans for the following morning. It would be tricky, but if he could pull it off, he knew it would be worth it.

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WEARING GLASSES AND A COWBOY HAT, Cody made his way across town toward the Sanders' home.

Theresa opened the door, rocking a baby—Faith, he guessed, by the yellow ribbon in her hair. “Hello—”

Cody looked around. “Is anyone else home?” Cody whispered urgently.

Theresa looked scared. She took a step back. “Yes, Edna Petunia is here.” The man at the front door was tall and wore a trench coat, a hat that shaded his face, and large glasses.

Cody nodded. He slid the glasses off the bridge of his nose. “It's

me.” He used his other arm to grab Theresa’s hand and squeezed it gently.

Theresa’s body came alive at Cody’s touch. “Cody?” She peered up at him, shocked.

“I wore a disguise so no one would suspect.” Cody explained. “I needed to see you.”

Theresa’s heart sang. “I’m so happy you came to see me.”

“I couldn’t stay away,” Cody told her.

Theresa smiled. “I should check on Gabriel.”

“Let me help you,” Cody told her as he followed her to the formal parlor.

When they got into the parlor, Cody went over to Gabriel’s crib and gently lifted the baby. He swayed back and forth, patting the infant on the back. Theresa felt a swell of emotion as she watched Cody with Gabriel. Cody was so diligent and attentive to the babies. Even though she knew the babies didn’t belong to him, he acted as if he was their father.

Footsteps upstairs interrupted Theresa’s daydreams. She tried to think of an excuse for a stranger to be in the formal parlor. “If Edna Petunia comes in, what will we tell her?”

“Tell her I’m a constable, investigating a crime that has taken place in Nowhere,” Cody said quickly.

Theresa laughed. “How did you think of that?”

Cody grinned sheepishly. “I read about it in a book. It seemed like a good disguise.”

“I think you’re right about that. I can say that I didn’t have a choice but to let you in,” Theresa said.

“That sounds like a good plan.” Cody nodded.

For the first time in days, Theresa felt relieved. She was constantly thinking about the babies and all the things she needed to do in order to keep them safe. With Cody nearby, she could stop worrying and enjoy their company.

As Cody rocked Gabriel in his arms, Theresa admired his strong jawline and broad shoulders. She remembered his words on the day he had proposed to her. Although she knew Edna Petunia and Cletus would never allow it, she found herself wishing that she and Cody could get married after all.

She wondered if they would be able to run away and get married secretly before Edna Petunia and Cletus could stop them. When Theresa heard Edna Petunia’s voice calling out for her, she immediately felt guilty for her thoughts. She quickly straightened. “Yes, Edna Petunia?”

“Who are you talking to?” Edna Petunia called.

“No one!” Theresa called out without thinking about it. “I mean,

someone!”

Cody shook his head in amusement. Theresa seemed rattled.

Edna Petunia stomped into the formal parlor. “Who are you, and what are you doing in my house?”

Theresa remembered Cody’s cover story. “This is Mr.—er—Constable Jones.”

“That tells me who he is, but not what he’s doing in my house,” Edna Petunia said stonily.

“He’s investigating a crime,” Theresa replied quickly.

“And why can’t he speak for himself?” Edna Petunia asked suspiciously.

Cody took a deep breath and lowered his voice. “I apologize, ma’am. I am investigating a theft that took place a few miles south of here.”

Edna Petunia put her hands on her hips. “Crime in Nowhere is rarer than a fly on a horse’s rump in January!”

Theresa cringed. There was no way they would be able to escape Edna Petunia’s wrath. She had surely seen right through their plan.

Cody held his breath. He would do whatever it took if it meant he would keep getting to see Theresa. But he was running out of options. If Edna Petunia didn’t believe he was a constable, he didn’t have any other ideas.

Edna Petunia stared at the strange man in front of her. Something about him struck her as familiar, but she couldn’t put a finger on it. “Well?”

Cody felt his heart racing. He hoped his face didn’t give away his fear that Edna Petunia would ask him to leave. “Yes?”

“Aren’t you going to tell me what the crime was?” Edna Petunia laughed loudly. “You say you’re a constable, but you’re not a very good one.”

Cody and Theresa joined Edna Petunia with nervous laughter. Theresa felt like her cheeks were on fire. She had been sure Edna Petunia would recognize Cody, but so far, his disguise seemed to be working.

Cody thought quickly. “Cattle!”

Edna Petunia frowned. “Do you expect me to believe cattle committed a crime?”

Cody shook his head vigorously. “No, ma’am. It was . . . a cattle theft!”

“Hm.” Edna Petunia nodded but seemed distracted. Theresa was worried that she was going to confront Cody any moment. “Well, there are no cattle here.”

Just then, Faith began to cry, and Theresa went to comfort her.

Edna Petunia sighed. “I need to lie down.”

Theresa breathed a huge sigh of relief as she heard Edna Petunia go back upstairs.

Cody grinned and stepped closer to Theresa. "I can't believe we pulled that off."

"I can't either," Theresa agreed.

"We make a good team," Cody said.

Theresa blushed. "Yes. I suppose we do."

As soon as Faith quieted, Cody took the baby from Theresa's hands and set the baby down in her cradle. Cody took Theresa's hands. "Now we need to figure out how I can see you every day."

Theresa felt a rush of joy at the thought of seeing Cody every day. "I would like that."

Cody pulled Theresa closer, bringing his mouth closer to hers. Just as their lips were about to touch, there was a loud knocking at the door.

Theresa pulled back. "I should get that."

Cody sighed in disappointment as Theresa rushed to the door. He watched the babies as they lay in their cribs. Faith sucked on one of her fists. It seemed as if they had grown in the short amount of time since he'd last seen them.

Theresa returned to the parlor with Dorothy. "This is my sister Dorothy."

Dorothy extended her hand, seeming a bit confused. "Pleased to meet you. I had to stop by and visit these darling twins. Now that my babies aren't as small anymore, I find myself missing the little ones!"

Cody shook her hand. "The pleasure is mine. I'm Constable . . . Witherspoon."

"The Constable was just leaving," Theresa said. "I'll show you to the door." Theresa whispered to Cody as she led him to the front door. "Witherspoon? You couldn't think of any other name?"

"I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking," Cody told her.

Theresa paused in the entry. "It's all right. I just don't want you to get caught, because then we wouldn't be able to see each other. We can't let anyone from my family find out."

Cody nodded solemnly. "I know you're right."

Theresa thought she heard wailing from the parlor. "I should get back to the twins."

"I'll be back to visit you tomorrow, Theresa," Cody said. He leaned in closer and kissed her on the lips.

Theresa couldn't focus on anything but the feeling of Cody's mouth against hers. She felt lucky that she had met such a kind, caring, and strapping man. She couldn't wait until she saw him again. Each time any part of Cody grazed her, Theresa felt ripples of electricity shoot throughout her entire body. Even though she knew she couldn't, she

imagined engaging in improper relations with Cody. She had gossiped with some of her sisters about marital activities, but she had never understood the appeal before. Now, it was practically all she thought about when she thought of Cody.

Cody gave her one last kiss on the forehead, then exited the Sanders' house.

Theresa returned to the formal parlor, where she found Dorothy balancing both babies and rocking them back and forth.

"They were both a bit fussy," Dorothy explained. "Why was the Constable here? I don't think I've ever seen that man before. He can't be the Constable for Nowhere."

Theresa sighed. "It's a long story. Can I tell you later? I'm exhausted."

Dorothy's eyes widened with sympathy. "Oh, Theresa! Of course you can. Are you getting much sleep?"

Theresa shook her head. "As soon as I get one baby down, the other one wakes up. As soon as one baby is full, the other one needs a diaper change."

"I'm sorry, Theresa. In all my excitement about the babies, I never thought about how much work they must be for you," Dorothy said. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Not that I can think of. But thank you," Theresa said gratefully.

"Well, I'm sure that soon we'll find the family these little sweethearts belong to, and they'll be on their merry way. Then I'm sure you'll be able to get some sleep!" Dorothy suggested cheerfully.

Theresa felt her heart sink as she imagined handing over the babies to someone else. Even though she hadn't given birth to them, she felt the babies were her own. It was her duty to love and protect them.

Dorothy noticed Theresa's face fall. "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing," Theresa said with a grimace. "I need to prepare more infant food for Gabriel. Please excuse me."

Dorothy frowned as she watched her sister walk out of the room. She could tell something was wrong—but what was it?

## Five

CODY KNOCKED on the door to the ice cream parlor, hoping this visit would prove more fruitful than the past five. Throughout Nowhere, everyone seemed reluctant to purchase insurance from him.

He reminded himself to ask Theresa if she thought he was doing anything wrong. Cody had enjoyed success in towns throughout the country. His easy demeanor, charm, and intelligence often made people feel open and comfortable around him, willing to purchase insurance to protect their homes and their loved ones.

But in Nowhere, everyone seemed suspicious. He hadn't signed a single client since arriving in the town. It wasn't the money he cared about. He had done so well on his previous assignments, he could have afforded to stop working and enjoy himself for several months or even years. But Cody would never be able to do that. He valued an honest day's work, and there was nothing that would stop him from doing his best.

He thought about his failed marriage proposal to Theresa. How would he be able to prove to her family that he was worthy of her if he couldn't even make a single sale in Nowhere?

An older woman opened the door to the ice cream parlor. She regarded him with suspicion. "We're not open yet."

Cody put on his cheeriest smile. "Good morning, ma'am. Are you the proprietor of this establishment?"

She shook her head crossly. "I told you, we're not open. Come back at noon if you want ice cream."

"I'd like to speak to you about your insurance needs," Cody explained. "Are you the right person to talk to?"

The woman folded her arms. "No. The owner is my husband, and he's not here. You best get out of here unless you want to make him angry."

Cody nodded hastily. "Yes, ma'am. I understand. I hope to come back when your husband is here."

The woman slammed the door in his face. Cody sighed. He had hoped that his luck would change with the ice cream parlor, but instead it had just been a repeat of the other businesses he had tried.

All week, Cody had been working up the nerve to pay a visit to Cletus Sanders. He had learned from Mrs. Winchester that as a practicing lawyer and the town judge, Cletus had his own office on

Main Street in Nowhere. Before he visited, though, he was hoping to have a few sales under his belt. If he could come to Cletus Sanders with a list full of clients from Nowhere, Cletus might trust him more. If other people were willing to do business with him, maybe Cletus would allow Cody to court his daughter.

Cody knew he was running out of time. As he trudged away from the ice cream parlor, he realized that there weren't many businesses left in Nowhere. He needed to stop avoiding Cletus Sanders.

Cody decided to pay a visit to Cletus that very day. He was tired of sneaking around with Theresa. He wanted everyone to recognize and respect his intentions. Theresa was unlike any woman he'd ever met before. She was strong-willed and spirited, unafraid to confront him if she didn't agree with him. He liked the way she teased him. Most of all, she made him want to be a better man.

He didn't know of any young woman who would willingly take on two infants without a partner to support her. He hated to think of Theresa growing into an old maid, unable to find a husband because she was too busy caring for the twins as they grew. Instead, he saw himself bursting into the picture, helping her, earning a stable income that they could use to buy a house together and watch the twins grow up.

He had no doubt that Theresa would be a very capable mother, but Faith and Gabriel needed a strong man in their lives, too. They needed a father. And he was certain he was the right man for the job.

Cody was fired up as he walked over to where Cletus's law office was located. He knocked on the door, feeling energized and ready to conquer anything.

"Hello!" Cletus answered the door with a big smile on his face. It turned into a grimace when he saw Cody. "Oh, it's you."

Cody refused to let Cletus's dismay cloud his cheerful mood. "Good day, sir. I'm here to talk to you about two things. Your insurance policy, and your daughter."

"I have four insurance policies and fifteen daughters, so you're going to have to be a lot more specific," Cletus responded irritably. He walked toward his desk and plopped down, leaning back and folding his hands across his stomach. "Tim's out to lunch, so you may want to save half your energy for later."

Cody ignored Cletus's remark and took a seat opposite Cletus. "I believe I can help make sure your policies truly cover you in the case of an accident or natural disaster. And I'd like to court your daughter, Theresa." Cody opened his briefcase and pulled out some materials. "I've done the research on your land and the properties you own, and you may want to consider additional coverage—"

Cletus waved his hands around. "I've heard enough. I don't know

who told you that I was a fool, but you're sorely mistaken if you think I'm going to fall for your sweet-talking words. Around here in Nowhere, we trust each other and do business with each other. We don't need city folk to tell us what to do with our hard-earned money."

Cody's heart sank. He wasn't ready to give up. "Sir, I would like to talk to you about insurance, but if you're not interested, I can respect that. I am truly serious about my feelings for Theresa. I'd like to marry her."

Cletus shook his head. "You must think that if you marry into my family, I'll want to do business with you. Well, that's not the way I operate. Please, take your business and move along to the next town on your map. I have work to do."

Cletus stood up and ushered Cody to the door. Before Cody could react, he was out on the doorstep. What was he going to do?

He had been sure that if he could talk to Cletus, man to man, he would be able to convince the older man that his intentions were pure. But Cletus hadn't been willing to listen to him.

Maybe Cletus was right. Maybe he should give up on his romantic notions of courting Theresa and move on to the next town. There were other women he could grow to love.

As he thought about Theresa's face, a searing pain shot through his leg. He looked down at his shoe. He had stepped on a rusty nail. Groaning, he pulled the nail out of his shoe and limped away. Gasping in pain, he searched for a bench so he could take his shoe off and examine his foot properly.

Instead of a bench, he saw something better—a sign for a doctor's office! Dr. Harvey & Dr. Bennett were listed outside a small office. Cody limped toward the front door and knocked on it.

"Come on in!" a young woman's voice called. Cody stepped inside gratefully. "What seems to be your trouble, sir?"

Cody gestured toward his foot. "I stepped on a nail, and I'm worried that I might have a bad cut on my foot."

"Oh, my! I'm sorry to hear that. Let me find Dr. Bennett. He's in today." The girl disappeared into the back of the small building.

A tall, friendly man hurried out to greet Cody. "Hello. I'm Dr. Stephen Bennett. I understand you've had a little accident?"

Cody nodded as Dr. Bennett gripped his hand in a firm handshake.

"Follow me," Dr. Bennett instructed.

"I hope you feel better, sir," the girl called as Cody trailed Dr. Bennett into the small examination room.

"Have a seat." Dr. Bennett pointed to the table, and Cody climbed on top of it, trying not to call out in pain.

"How does it feel?" Dr. Bennett asked kindly. He eased Cody's shoe



off his foot.

"Not good," Cody told him, gritting his teeth. Dr. Bennett peeled Cody's sock off, and Cody saw that it was stained with blood. Cody looked away.

Dr. Bennett gingerly lifted Cody's foot up so he could get a good look at it. "Looks like a nice clean puncture. I'll stitch you up, and you should be good as new in a few days' time. You'll have to watch out for infection, of course, but you should be fine."

"Thank you, Dr. Bennett." Cody appreciated the doctor's quick and efficient manner. He took deep breaths to distract himself from the thought of Dr. Bennett sticking a needle into his foot. To keep his mind on a happier thought, he pictured Theresa. She would probably be putting the babies down for a nap at that moment. He hoped he'd be able to see her soon.

"Are you all right?" Dr. Bennett's expression was concerned when Cody finally came to attention.

"What's wrong?" Cody asked.

"I've been calling your name for a few minutes. I thought you were about to pass out!" Dr. Bennett seemed relieved.

"I'm sorry, Doctor. I've had a lot on my mind lately," Cody admitted.

"That's all right. I'm nearly done. Do you live around here? I don't recall seeing you, and Nowhere's a small town," Dr. Bennett responded.

"I'm boarding with Mrs. Winchester. I'm in town on business," Cody explained. "I sell insurance policies. I don't know how much longer I'll be here, though."

"I see. What do you think of our town? Nowhere takes some getting adjusted to. I moved here to work for my aunt's medical practice and ended up meeting my wife here!" Dr. Bennett told Cody.

"It certainly seems like the townspeople are, well, close to one another," Cody said politely. He didn't want to offend Dr. Bennett.

"That's right! We take care of one another. But sometimes, it can be hard for an outsider," Dr. Bennett admitted.

"It's good to hear you say that," Cody replied. "I thought it was just me."

"No," Dr. Bennett laughed, clipping the thread with a small pair of scissors. "It's not just you. I'll bet you're having a tough time selling policies, though."

Cody was surprised. "How did you know?"

"Like I said," Dr. Bennett continued, "We take care of our own. If people don't know you, they're less likely to trust you. And if there's no trust, there's no money. Heck, my father-in-law is the perfect example of that! Old Cletus . . ." He trailed off in amusement.

“Did you say Cletus, as in Cletus Sanders?” Cody asked eagerly.

“You’ve met him?” Dr. Bennett tied off the stitch. “Quite the character, isn’t he? I’m married to one of his adopted daughters, Hope.”

“You are?” Cody’s eyes widened.

Dr. Bennett chuckled. “I am. And I’m all done. How does it feel?”

Cody wiggled his foot a little. “Feels fine. Thank you, Doctor!”

“You’re welcome,” Dr. Bennett said kindly. He went into the cabinet and found a clean pair of socks. “I keep a few extra sets of clothes in the office in case I need to change. You can keep them.”

Cody accepted the socks. “Thank you, Dr. Bennett. I appreciate it. The reason I was curious about Cletus . . . well . . .” He trailed off, unsure if he should say any more.

“What is it?” Dr. Bennett leaned in, curious.

“I met Theresa, and I—” Cody didn’t know how to summarize his feelings for the woman.

Dr. Bennett sat back, a twinkle in his eyes. “Say no more, my friend. You’ve fallen for one of the Sanders sisters.”

Cody sighed. “I’m afraid I have.”

“Why so glum? Does Theresa know how you feel about her?” Dr. Bennett asked.

“She does,” Cody replied. “It’s her *parents* that are the problem.” He explained the entirety of the situation to Dr. Bennett.

Dr. Bennett nodded. “Hm. That’s a tough one. But maybe Cletus and Edna Petunia would start to come around if you could demonstrate that you had made some sales.”

“I agree,” Cody said. “But no one is buying.”

“It just so happens that our policy is about to lapse,” Dr. Bennett explained. “We usually renew through the mail, but in this case, let me talk to my aunt. Maybe we should explore some of our other options.”

Cody felt hopeful for the first time in days. “You’d do that for me?”

Dr. Bennett grinned. “I’ve been in your shoes before, Cody. I feel it’s my duty to help you out. After all, if things work out well, maybe you’ll be my brother-in-law one day!”

Cody couldn’t help but smile. “Thank you, Dr. Bennett.” He pumped the doctor’s hand enthusiastically, then opened his briefcase and pulled out a few papers. “Here’s some information you can show your aunt. I’m happy to review any of it with you, too.”

Dr. Bennett took the papers. “Great. I’ll show these to her. Where can I find you if we want to move forward? You said you’re staying at Mrs. Winchester’s?”

“That’s right, but I’ll make it easier for you. I’ll come meet you here in three days’ time. Will you be able to speak with your aunt by

then?" Cody asked.

"That seems reasonable. I'll see you then. And in the meantime, watch out for broken nails!" Dr. Bennett warned.

Cody laughed. Things were looking up!

## Six

THERESA SANDERS ROCKED the babies back and forth, swaying as she tried to figure out what her brothers-in-law were up to. Everyone waited for Sunday services to begin, but the young men of the family were acting in a peculiar fashion. Stephen, Lewis, and Will—the newest brother-in-law—were whispering furiously and pointing toward the back of the church. The other brothers-in-law were crowded around them.

Usually, each family sat together, alternating couples and children in various rows. This time, the men had left their wives and children to clump together as a group. Theresa was certain that something was going on, she just didn't know what it could be.

Suddenly, there was a commotion in the church as the men's whispers changed into downright laughter. The only brother-in-law who wasn't in the throng was Pastor Micah. He walked to the front of the church, looking every bit as confused as Theresa felt. He stopped when he approached the men. Theresa saw him whisper something in Lewis's ear, then turn around.

Theresa turned around to see what Micah was looking at. In the back of the church was Cody Witherspoon, wearing a suit that seemed brand-new and a wide-brimmed hat. He took the hat off and scanned the pews before his eyes came to a rest on Stephen.

Cody strode confidently through the church and took his seat next to Dr. Bennett. In just a few days, Dr. Bennett had helped him turn his luck around completely. Not only had Dr. Bennett and Dr. Harvey purchased an insurance policy, but they'd also introduced him to all of the other husbands of Theresa's sisters.

Cody was amazed at how many businesses and properties were owned by the Sanders sons-in-law—from a book wagon to a fully stocked mercantile, the husbands certainly stayed busy. In less than a week's time, Cody had more business than he knew what to do with.

It wasn't about the money, though. He knew that the only thing that mattered was convincing Theresa to accept his marriage proposal—again. He still hoped for Edna Petunia and Cletus to give their blessing, and Dr. Bennett had told him that the brothers-in-law had devised a plan.

Cody took his seat, surprised to realize that he felt nervous. He rarely felt worried about anything, but he knew what he felt for

Theresa was important. He didn't even want to think about losing her.

"Just follow our lead," Dr. Bennett instructed Cody. "We have a plan."

Cody nodded but still felt apprehensive.

At the front of the church, Micah began services.

From their seat a few rows behind where Cody was sitting, Edna Petunia and Cletus exchanged glances. "Something's going on," Edna Petunia noted. She knew her sons-in-law got along well, but this seemed ridiculous. They had formed some sort of gaggle and even invited Cody Witherspoon to sit with them. Something awfully strange was occurring.

"Harumph," Cletus grunted. He tried to focus on what Micah was saying. He respected the man, but there were occasions where Micah droned on for what felt like hours. He hoped that wouldn't be the case on that day.

For Theresa, the service passed in a blur. She had to leave the building a few times when one of the twins started crying. She was starting to forget what life had been like before she had found the twins. They felt like a part of her life now.

As the services ended, two of the brothers-in-law, Jed and Carter, surrounded Cletus. "Hello!" Jed said brightly.

"We have someone we'd like you to speak with," Carter explained. Each man flanked Cletus as he stood up and ushered him back to the crowd of brothers-in-law.

"What is the meaning of this?" Cletus asked. He was ready to get back to the Sanders' home and eat his post-church slice of pie.

"You remember Mr. Witherspoon," Jed said as they approached the man.

Cletus frowned. "Of course. The salesman."

"You see, Cletus, we've all signed on for Cody's insurance policies. It turns out they're a lot better than the ones we previously had, and we pay less for premiums," Jed said lightly.

Cletus frowned. "You say you pay less?"

"That's right," Carter affirmed.

"I'd be happy to review your current policies with you and tell you a little more about our policies," Cody said politely.

"Hm. Maybe. We'll see," Cletus said sternly. "But now I'd like to go home with my family."

"There's something else," Lewis mentioned, coming around the other side of Cletus. "Mr. Witherspoon has something to ask of you."

"Sir, I'd like to court your daughter, Theresa," Cody said, remembering to be specific and straightforward this time.

Cletus paused and turned around so he could make eye contact with each man. The look on his face made Cody nervous. He was

silent for a long time, then finally spoke up. "Well, Theresa's her own person. She can decide for herself what she wants to do."

Cody breathed a sigh of relief. Around him, the other men relaxed and smiled.

Cletus elbowed his way away from the group and through the exit. "That was an ambush!"

"What was an ambush, dear?" Edna Petunia asked, sipping from her cough medicine flask outside.

"All of our daughters' husbands seemed to have joined forces. I don't like it one bit," Cletus told his wife. "Now, let's get home."

Edna Petunia nodded and scanned the crowd for Theresa. Katie was at her side, but Theresa and the babies were nowhere to be found.

Inside the church, Cody helped Theresa load the babies into their bassinette. Even though Cletus had given his approval, he still felt nervous. What if Theresa had changed her mind? She had seemed exhausted and sleep-deprived when she'd agreed to marry him originally. Maybe it had all been a big misunderstanding.

Theresa could hear her parents and Katie calling for her outside. She looked up at Cody's strong, handsome face. "I need to go. It was nice to see you."

"Wait," Cody said, grabbing onto Theresa's wrist. She felt a crackle of electricity every time he touched her, and she wanted more of it. "I'd like to court you, Theresa Sanders."

Theresa felt a fluttering sensation in her stomach. She felt lighter than air. She blinked back tears and nodded. "I'd like that."

"Oh, I'm so glad to hear that," Cody said, a smile spreading across his face.

"Theresa!" Edna Petunia called from outside the church. "We're leaving!"

Theresa could tell her family was getting impatient. "I need to go. But I hope to see you soon."

Cody nodded. "I'll be thinking about you every minute until I see you again." He looked around and made sure no one else was in the church, then leaned down and kissed Theresa on the lips.

When Cody finally stepped backwards, Theresa sucked in a deep breath. Cody had the strange effect of taking her breath away—but she found that she quite enjoyed it.

As Theresa carried the babies out into the bright, sunlit day, she imagined that one day, she may be climbing into Cody's wagon instead of Cletus's. The thought brought a smile to her face.

"What are you daydreaming about?" Katie whispered as she helped Theresa swing the bassinette into the wagon.

"Nothing," Theresa fibbed. She wasn't sure what to tell Katie or if she should even tell her parents about what Cody had asked her. Edna

Petunia and Cletus didn't seem like his biggest fans.

However, on the way home, Cody Witherspoon was all Cletus could talk about. "Seems all the sons-in-law are in cahoots with this man now. I'm inclined to trust him since they've all agreed to vouch for him. But Theresa, that's no reason to let him court you if you don't want to."

"I want him to court me," Theresa blurted out.

Katie giggled. "I knew it!"

"These bastards grow up so fast," Edna Petunia lamented. "Pretty soon suitors will be knocking on Faith's door."

"I think Cody is a good man, and he's already been wonderful with the babies," Theresa explained.

"Do you think you'll get married?" Katie asked. "A fall wedding would be nice. Or winter!" She began imagining it and was soon lost in reverie.

"It's too soon for that, Katie!" Theresa chided.

"But I thought he asked you—" Katie began.

Gabriel began fussing, and Theresa lifted him out of the bassinette to soothe him. "I don't know if I'll ever have time to get married," Theresa said honestly. "Not with these two around."

"That reminds me," Cletus said, clearing his throat. "We need to talk about those two little creatures."

It made Theresa nervous any time Cletus referred to the babies as "creatures." "What do we need to talk about?"

Cletus looked at Edna Petunia. "We think it's time the babies found a permanent home."

"Or homes," Edna Petunia added gently.

"What are you talking about?" Theresa felt shocked, angry, and taken aback. Gabriel began to cry louder, and soon, Faith began fussing, too.

Cletus continued to steer the wagon toward their home in Nowhere nonchalantly. "We haven't been able to find the mother. Everyone says it was a young girl who was passing through. None of her family lives around here."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Theresa asked. Whenever she thought about giving up either of the babies, her heart wrenched in agony.

Edna Petunia tried to soften the news. "Theresa, you're a young woman with your entire life ahead of you. You've bit off more than you can chew with two babies as a single woman."

"And heaven knows Edna Petunia and I aren't as youthful as we were when we took you all in. We just don't have it in us to take care of babies that young," Cletus continued.

Theresa thought Edna Petunia and Cletus looked the same as when

the orphans had arrived in Nowhere, but she decided to focus on the twins instead of mentioning this. "But who would take the babies? How would we know they were going to a good home?"

Edna Petunia and Cletus exchanged another look. Edna Petunia sighed. "There are two very nice families from church who are willing to adopt a baby apiece."

Theresa felt her stomach clench. "We *can't* split up the twins!"

"It's very difficult to take care of two babies at once, Theresa," Edna Petunia said gently.

"You of all people should know that," Cletus chimed in.

Theresa felt attacked. She had the urge to wait until the wagon stopped and jump out with the twins. She could find Cody, run away, and never come back. "It would be wrong to separate them," Theresa repeated.

Katie helped Theresa soothe the twins. "I wish we could keep them, too, Theresa," Katie added. "But it is a lot of work. I haven't been sleeping very well either. I can hear the babies crying upstairs."

Theresa felt tears pooling in her eyes. How did no one else understand? "All the twins have is each other. You said it yourself—we haven't been able to locate their mother. We can't take them away from each other!"

"That's enough arguing in the wagon. Let's discuss this further at home," Cletus declared.

Theresa nodded in understanding, but tears blurred her vision. She wiped them away, looking down lovingly at the babies. She had to find a way to tell Cody about what was happening. She knew he of all people would understand.

Later that evening, Theresa brought up the subject to Edna Petunia and Cletus again.

Cletus seemed crankier than he had earlier. "I need my home back, Theresa. This has gone on long enough. I can't even sit in my chair!"

Theresa had covered Cletus's chair in the formal parlor with baby clothes, bottles, and children's books that she read to the twins over and over again. "I'm sorry, Cletus. I'll clean it up."

Cletus sighed wearily. "It's not about the chair. It's about you not being old enough to raise two babies on your own."

"But I'm not on my own. I have my sisters, and I have Cody," Theresa pointed out. "Plus, I'm nearly as old as Ruby and Opal were when they had their twins."

"You're not even married, Theresa!" Edna Petunia said, exasperated. "I'm sick of the fighting around here. The babies are making us all angry with one another."

"You can't blame that on the babies!" Theresa cried passionately. She felt awful for the poor infants. First their mother had abandoned



them, and now that they were in a loving home, they were going to be abandoned again—and worse than that, they would be torn apart.

“I spoke to Gerald Sibley from church,” Cletus said. “He and his wife will be here on Wednesday to pick up one of the babies. I think they said they wanted the boy.”

Theresa held Gabriel closer. “They are not taking either of the babies. I won’t allow it.”

Cletus sighed. “Theresa, you’re acting like a spoiled child. I know Edna Petunia and I have taught you better than that.”

Theresa felt so angry she couldn’t think of an intelligent response. “You’re wrong!” Theresa cried, rushing out of the room with both babies in tow. She went upstairs into her bedroom, where she hadn’t slept in weeks. She laid both babies down on the bed, watching them carefully to make sure they didn’t squirm their way onto the floor. What was she going to do?

Katie came upstairs with the bassinette and some of the baby supplies. “Are you okay?”

Theresa sighed. “I don’t know. I can’t let the babies be split apart.”

Katie nodded. “You’ve been taking care of them nonstop since they arrived. I’m sure it’s hard to say goodbye.”

“It’s more than that, Katie,” Theresa said. “It’s hard to explain. But these babies are twins. That’s a special bond. Think about Ruby and Opal. Can you imagine one without the other?”

Katie thought about it. “You have a point there,” she admitted. “I can’t picture that.”

“You have to help me,” Theresa pleaded.

Katie gulped. “I don’t want to disobey Edna Petunia or Cletus.”

“I understand,” Theresa told her. “But this is about doing the right thing.”

Katie looked at the babies. “Okay. I’ll help you. For their sake.”

Theresa’s expression brightened. “I have an idea. Here’s how you can help me.” She explained her plan to Katie.

After some deliberation, Katie nodded. “I’ll see what I can do.”

## Seven

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Cody woke up to someone pounding on his door. He leapt out of bed and dressed quickly. He cracked open his door.

Mrs. Winchester peered at him, adjusting her glasses. "You have a visitor."

Cody's heart rose as he imagined Theresa visiting him with the babies even though he knew that would be unlikely. He followed Mrs. Winchester to the entrance to the boardinghouse and saw Katie Sanders there.

Katie fidgeted nervously with her hands. "Hi, Mr. Witherspoon."

"Call me Cody, please," Cody told her.

"You see, Mr. Witherspoon—Cody—my parents told Theresa that they're going to give the babies away. And they're going to split them up," Katie explained.

"What?" A look of horror crossed Cody's face. He had always assumed that Theresa would keep the babies for the rest of their lives. He thought that was what they both wanted.

"They've found two separate families to take the babies. They're coming to our house on Wednesday night to take them away," Katie told Cody.

Cody thought quickly. He had imagined courting Theresa for several weeks and eventually proposing to her again, this time with more preparation and style. But if she was in danger of the babies being taken away, he would need to adjust his plans. "Thank you for telling me that, Katie."

"You're welcome. Theresa wanted you to know. If you don't mind, I need to leave now to get to work. Theresa normally works at the school, but since she brought the babies home, I've been going in her place," Katie said.

"Of course. Have a good day, Katie," Cody told her and walked her to the front door.

"Thanks, Cody. You too!" Katie said cheerily. She exited the building and started for the schoolhouse.

Cody stood in the doorway, lost in thought. He needed to come up with a plan quickly. He knew what he wanted, but how could he make it happen in only two days' time?

He scrambled around all morning, learning as much as he could

from Dr. Bennett, Lewis, Jed, and Will, who had all become like brothers in the span of a few days. He'd learned Theresa's favorite color, favorite flower, and favorite type of candy.

Cody dressed in his nicest suit. He wanted to look the part for the occasion. He hoped it would be a day that he and Theresa would both remember forever.

As Cody set off for the Sanders' house, he realized that he hadn't had anything to eat or drink all day. It would be wise to get something to eat. If things went according to plan, he and the Sanders family would want to celebrate.

Cody decided to stop at the mercantile for a Coca Cola and a snack.

"Back so soon?" Lewis teased. He had helped Cody prepare candy for Theresa.

"I didn't want to go to the Sanders' house on an empty stomach," Cody explained.

Just then, the door opened and Fitzsimmon Clarkson strode into the mercantile. His face brightened when he saw Cody.

"Mr. Clarkson? What are you doing here?" Cody felt nervous suddenly. His boss had never shown up before in any of the other towns he had worked in. Was he in trouble?

"Good to see you, Witherspoon. I wasn't sure if I'd see you again," Clarkson joked.

"I'll leave you two alone. Let me know if you need anything," Lewis said, walking toward the back of the store with his ledger in hand.

"I'm not due back for two weeks," Cody pointed out.

"Relax, Witherspoon," Clarkson told him. "You're not in trouble. I just hadn't heard from you in a while, so I thought maybe the locals had captured you."

Cody smiled ruefully. "Not exactly."

"Ah, but there's something going on here, isn't there?" Clarkson took note of the bouquet of flowers and box of chocolates in Cody's hands.

Cody nodded sheepishly. "I'm about to propose."

Clarkson clapped Cody on the back. "Congratulations, son! This calls for celebration!"

Cody smiled, relieved that he wasn't in trouble with his boss. "Thank you, Mr. Clarkson."

"And it couldn't have come at a better time," Clarkson added.

"Why is that?" Cody was lost again.

"I'm promoting you to Vice President of Clarkson Insurance," Clarkson explained. "Congratulations, son! You've worked hard for this, and you've earned it."

Cody couldn't believe it. First, Theresa had agreed to let him court her, and now his employer was promoting him to Vice President of the company? It seemed too good to be true. Cody realized Clarkson was still talking.

"We'll have to introduce our wives, I'm sure they'll get along. We'll set you up in our neighborhood. There are a lot of nice properties where you could build a home if you'd like, or plenty to choose from if you want to buy one," Clarkson rambled.

"Your neighborhood?" Cody asked, confused.

"Naturally, you'll need to be at corporate headquarters in Austin," Clarkson explained. "It will be nice for your new wife-to-be that you won't be traveling so much, don't you think?"

Cody considered it. Austin sounded promising. He'd been there a few times before and had always enjoyed himself. But he hadn't talked to Theresa about moving. He knew that she had moved once before—from Orlan to Nowhere—but how did she feel about moving again? And did she even like living in a city?

"I thought you'd be overjoyed!" Clarkson seemed dismayed. "Where's the enthusiasm? Are you not excited to take this job?"

"Oh, no, sir! I'm delighted!" Cody assured his boss. "Thank you for the opportunity. You won't regret it."

"Excellent," Clarkson smiled. "I'll expect you there in two weeks' time. I'll arrange for a rental house for you. Just the two of you, I assume?"

"Actually . . ." Cody trailed off. How would he explain this delicate situation to his employer?

Clarkson frowned. "More than two of you?"

"It's a rather long story, Mr. Clarkson. If you can do me a favor, I'll tell you the whole story soon. But if things go according to my plan, we'll have a set of infants with us when we move in two weeks," Cody replied.

Clarkson whistled. "Witherspoon, how scandalous! You haven't even made her an honest woman yet, and there are twins on the way?"

Lewis poked his head up from his desk near the back of the store. "Everything okay out there?"

"It's fine," Cody called back. He looked at Clarkson. "I promise I'll explain everything later. But it's not what you think."

Clarkson smiled and clapped Cody on the back again. "Whatever you say, Witherspoon. In any case, I was just passing through on my own way back to Austin, and I hoped I'd find you here. I've been to a few establishments—a law office, a doctor's office, and a trading house. It seems like you have clients everywhere in this town. Well done, Witherspoon!"

Cody was relieved that Clarkson had visited that day and not a week earlier, when he'd had no clients at all. "Thank you, Mr. Clarkson."

"Goodbye, sir!" Clarkson called to Lewis as he headed for the door. "See you in a few weeks, Witherspoon!"

Cody took a deep breath. This would add some complications to his plan, but he was confident that with Theresa's help, they would be able to figure it out. "I'm going to the Sanders' house now," Cody told Lewis.

Lewis came back up to the front of the store. "I thought you wanted to eat something."

"I suddenly have a lot more on my mind than food," Cody explained.

"Who was that man? Did he bring you trouble?" Lewis asked, concerned.

"No, nothing like that," Cody replied. "He's my boss, Fitzsimmon Clarkson. He just gave me a promotion."

"You don't seem very excited about that," Lewis observed.

Cody sighed. "It's a wonderful opportunity. But it also would involve moving to Austin in two weeks. I don't know how Theresa will feel about all this. Or how we'll travel to Austin with the babies. Just taking them back and forth to church can be a challenge!"

Lewis nodded. "I'd be sad to see you both move to the city. But you need to do what's right for your job. Plus, with so many of us holding one of your policies, maybe you could justify a trip to Nowhere every now and again."

"That's a good idea. I think I need to talk to Theresa before doing anything else," Cody said.

"All right," Lewis said. He handed Cody a small package of nuts. "Take these in case you get hungry."

"Thank you, Lewis," Cody said gratefully. He was appreciative that all of Theresa's brothers-in-law were so effusive and generous. It seemed like they genuinely wanted Cody in their family.

Now he just had to convince the most important person of all that he belonged.

Cody rushed away from the mercantile, carrying his surprises for Theresa. He knocked on the door and waited for someone to answer.

As Cody waited on the porch, he practiced what he would say to Theresa. After a few minutes, he looked at his watch and frowned. On every other visit to the Sanders' house, someone had opened the door quickly for him. Where was everyone?

Cody wondered if they weren't home. The family wagon was gone, but that could have simply meant that Cletus was at work. Cody pounded on the door again just in case. He set down the flowers and

chocolate, saving them as a surprise in case Theresa opened the door. He wanted everything to be perfect.

This time, Theresa opened the door. Her eyes were red-rimmed as if she had been crying. "Oh, Cody," Theresa breathed and flung herself into his arms.

Cody wrapped himself around Theresa and squeezed her, trying to comfort her. "What's wrong?"

Theresa tried to speak, but tears ran down her cheeks. She motioned for Cody to follow her into the formal parlor.

Cody looked down at the babies snuggled in their bassinette and realized with a shock that only Gabriel was in the bassinette! Gabriel rolled around, seeming agitated with fat, wet tears rolling down his face. "Where's Faith?"

Theresa's bottom lip trembled. "I thought they weren't coming until Wednesday. But they came today for Faith."

"Who are you talking about? What are you saying, Theresa?" Cody asked.

"The family who wants to adopt Faith," Theresa explained tearfully. "Cletus said they were coming on Wednesday for Gabriel, but there was another family who came this morning for Faith. She's gone!"

"Oh, no!" Cody exclaimed. He finally understood why Theresa was so upset. His proposal would have to wait—the babies were more important. "Do you know where they live?"

"That's the worst part," Theresa continued. "The family who wants to adopt Gabriel lives in Nowhere. But the family who took Faith lives in the next town over. They are relatives of some of our friends from church. Oh, Cody, I don't know how I'll go on without the twins in my life!"

"Don't worry, Theresa. I'll find a way to fix this," Cody said. Even as the words were coming out of his mouth, he realized he had no idea if it was true or not. He certainly hoped he could fix it, but there were no guarantees. Still, he had to do everything in his power to get the babies back. "At least we still have Gabriel."

Theresa nodded, picking Gabriel up and holding him to her chest. He quieted a little, but Cody could still see the tears on his cheeks.

"Do you know where the family who took Faith lives?" Cody asked. If she could find out their address, maybe they could pay the family a visit and convince them to give her back.

Theresa shook her head. "I have no idea. It all happened so quickly, Cody. How could I have let this happen?" She looked down at the floor guiltily.

Cody placed his hands gently on Theresa's shoulders. "It absolutely was not your fault, Theresa. You've done everything you can to take

care of those babies. It's not your fault this happened."

"It's hard not to feel like it is," Theresa admitted. "I should have stood up to Cletus and Edna Petunia."

Cody pulled Theresa in for a hug. He ran his hands up and down her arms, trying to comfort her. "I'm here now. We can confront them together."

Theresa nodded. "Thank you. I know I may not show it, but that means everything to me."

Cody and Theresa waited until Cletus got home from work to talk to both Cletus and Edna Petunia. Cody could tell that Theresa hadn't slept in days, so he sent her to her room to take a nap as he took over Gabriel's care. The poor boy wailed and fussed all afternoon. Cody was sure that Gabriel was upset because his sister had been taken away. He hated to think about the babies being separated. He and Theresa's plan had to work. It just had to.

## Eight

THERESA SLOWLY ROCKED Gabriel back and forth. Even though he was too young to be able to do much of anything, she could sense a special connection that they shared. And one thing was certain—both of them missed Faith terribly.

Theresa had washed Gabriel and dressed him in the finest newborn clothes handed down to him from one of his cousins. She couldn't remember which sister had given it to her, but it was a beautiful linen dressing gown that was only slightly too big for Gabriel. He looked darling in it, but Theresa felt a pang of sorrow in her chest as she looked at him. Faith should be there by his side.

Edna Petunia and Cletus had instructed Theresa to wash and dress Gabriel so he would be ready for the Sibley family to pick him up. Theresa didn't want to think about handing Gabriel over. Ever since Faith had been taken from her, he was all she had left.

Theresa hoped desperately that Cody's plan would be successful. He seemed sure that he could convince all the parties involved that the babies belonged to them. Soon, they'd be married, and no one could tell her that she wouldn't be able to provide for the babies. She didn't think it was polite to talk about money, but she knew that Cody was comfortable financially. He had assured her that he would easily be able to pay for the living expenses of a family of four.

"Theresa!" Edna Petunia called from below. "They're here!"

Theresa sighed and squeezed Gabriel a little tighter. "I don't want to say goodbye," Theresa whispered. She kissed Gabriel on the forehead.

"Theresa!" Cletus hollered.

Theresa felt like tears would stream down her face at any moment, but she composed herself and carried Gabriel down the steps carefully.

Gerald and Veronica sat politely in the formal parlor, chatting with Edna Petunia and Cletus. When Theresa brought Gabriel into the room, Veronica stood up and rushed to take him from Theresa's hands.

Theresa didn't want to let Gabriel go, but she also didn't want him to get hurt, so she allowed Veronica to pull him into her arms.

Mrs. Sibley immediately began cooing. "Oh, isn't he just darling, Gerald?"

"She hasn't been able to stop talking about babies for years. Now



that our daughter is out of the house, she wanted to fill it,” Gerald explained to Cletus. Mary Sibley, Gerald and Veronica’s only daughter, had recently married.

Theresa tried not to show her true emotions. She didn’t want to hurt Gerald or Veronica’s feelings, but they were old. She didn’t know how they would possibly take care of a newborn child. And as Gabriel grew older, how would they be able to chase after him?

“Thank you for taking care of this little cherub for us, Tara,” Veronica smiled.

“It’s Theresa,” Theresa corrected her.

Veronica ignored her, distracted by a squirming Gabriel in her arms.

“Well, we’d best be going. We’ll have our hands full tonight.” Gerald shook Cletus’s hand.

Within a minute, Gerald and Veronica had departed the Sanders’ house, taking Gabriel with them. Theresa could not contain her emotions any longer. Tears rolled down her face.

Edna Petunia offered Theresa a peppermint stick. “This will help.”

Theresa shook her head. “Nothing will help.”

Cletus frowned. “I’m sure you’ll be as cheery as usual. You just have to give yourself a little time, Theresa. You’ll miss the babies for a while, but you’ll get over it. You have your whole life ahead of you!”

Theresa sat down, unsure what to do next. Without a baby to feed, change, or hold, she felt useless.

Just then, there was a knock at the door. Despite her tearstained face, Theresa walked to the entrance to open it. She was expecting someone.

As she opened the door, Cody took one look at Theresa’s face and knew exactly what had happened. “I’m too late.”

Theresa simply nodded.

“Who’s there?” Edna Petunia shouted. “We don’t have any babies left to give away!”

Cody hated to see Theresa so miserable. He pulled her into his arms and rubbed her back reassuringly. “It will be all right. I promise.”

“How do you know that?” Theresa sobbed. Even though it wasn’t Cody’s fault, she felt angry.

“Let’s go talk to Edna Petunia and Cletus. I’m sure they’ll help us get this settled.” Cody wasn’t convinced that what he was saying was true, but he had to hope for the best. He couldn’t let Theresa down. He had to keep trying to make things right.

Theresa wiped tears from her cheek. “If you say so.”

Cody strode toward the parlor, and Theresa trailed after him.

“Don’t tell me you want to adopt a baby, too.” Cletus chuckled. He

shook Cody's hand. Cody couldn't believe how different the man seemed than when Cody had first arrived in Nowhere. That Cletus had been disapproving and stern. The man in front of Cody seemed relaxed and carefree.

"Actually, sir, there's something we need to discuss, and it does relate to the babies," Cody explained.

Cletus touched a hand to his head as if he were in pain.

"Peppermint stick?" Edna Petunia offered.

Cletus shook his head, and Edna Petunia stuck the stick in her own mouth, loudly crunching it.

Cody took the pause in conversation to launch into his speech. He had practiced at the boarding house that morning as he'd shaved. He was ready to say what needed to be said. "Sir," Cody began. "I plan to marry Theresa. I can provide for her, and I can provide for the two babies who have been in her care for the past several weeks."

"The babies are gone, though," Edna Petunia pointed out. She was baffled. Cody seemed like a nice enough man, but he didn't seem very bright at the moment. She wanted to make sure every one of her bastards ended up with a deserving husband.

"We need your help to get the babies back. You said that Theresa couldn't support them as a single woman. Well, soon she'll be married to me. We can certainly support two infants better than the families who have them now." Cody continued.

Theresa stopped sobbing as she listened to Cody's impassioned plea. Would it work?

Cletus's face remained neutral. "Now, I don't know where you come from, but here in Nowhere, fair's fair. We gave those babies to good homes; we're not going to take them back."

Cody's heart sank. How could Cletus not see what was going on? "With all due respect, sir, I know Theresa and I can give both babies the best possible chance in life."

Theresa swallowed hard. "And they'd be together. They're going to be so lonely apart." A fresh wave of tears overtook her.

Edna Petunia went to her daughter to comfort her. "She has a point, you know. The little bastards seemed awfully fond of one another. Well, as fond of one another as two lumps could be."

Theresa smiled through her tears. Edna Petunia had such a strange but delightful way with words.

Katie entered the formal parlor. "What's the matter? I heard crying from upstairs. Theresa, what's wrong?"

"Both the babies are gone," Theresa said, tearing up again.

Cody put an arm around Theresa's shoulder. "But we're going to get them back."

"You are?" Katie asked, wide-eyed.

Cletus crossed his arms. "I don't know about that."

Cody thought quickly. "What's the name of the family who took Faith? We know who took Gabriel."

Cletus frowned and scratched his head. "It was the Thomas family from Bagley. We know them through Penny and Tom."

Cody nodded. "I'm going to pay them a visit. Theresa, will you join me?"

Theresa looked up, feeling hopeful at the prospect of seeing little Faith. "Absolutely."

Cletus shook his head. "This isn't a good idea. You're only going to upset her further."

"And you might really upset the Thomases and the Sibleys," Katie pointed out.

"Whose side are you on, Katie?" Theresa asked, her voice quavering.

Katie looked horrified for a moment and rushed to Theresa's side. "I'm sorry, Theresa. I didn't mean to upset *you*! I was just trying to help."

"We know you didn't mean any harm by it, Katie," Cody reassured her. He knew Katie had Theresa's best interests at heart, too.

"Let's go, Cody," Theresa said. Every minute away from the babies felt like torture. She hoped that they weren't too upset without one other.

"But you'll miss dinner," Edna Petunia protested.

"I'm not hungry." Theresa smoothed the wrinkles in her skirt. "We should go to Bagley first. Faith's been away for the longest amount of time; she may be very upset."

Cody nodded and then held his hand out to Theresa. She accepted it, and they started toward the entrance.

"Wait just a minute." Cletus held up a hand. "What exactly are your intentions?"

Cody fought off a groan. Cletus clearly didn't understand how he and Theresa felt about the babies. In Cody's mind, they were already a family. Why did he have to spell it all out for Cletus? "We're going to bring the babies back and raise them as our own."

"I don't see a ring on my daughter's finger," Cletus challenged.

Katie gasped.

Cody sighed. "There will be soon, sir."

"Oh, my goodness!" Edna Petunia shouted. She took a sip from her hip flask.

"And where will you live? I thought you're supposed to be some traveling salesman," Cletus said grumpily.

"Well—we'll live—" Cody wasn't sure exactly how to answer Cletus's question.

"We'll find a place," Theresa said confidently, slipping her hand into Cody's.

Cody looked at her admiringly. He was so in love with the strong, confident young woman beside him. Even though she was hurting, she knew how to stand up for what she felt was right.

"You two can do whatever you want," Cletus said, waving his hands. "But if I were Gerald Sibley, there's no way I'd give a newborn baby to a traveling salesman and his unmarried female companion."

Theresa felt stung, but she had to admit, Cletus had a point. She looked up at Cody, whose face had frozen. "Are you all right?" Theresa whispered.

"I need to go now," Cody said suddenly, turning around and sprinting for the door.

"Cody?" Theresa rushed after him, but he opened and slammed the door shut behind him before she got to the entrance. She returned to the formal parlor with a dejected, bewildered expression.

"Hmph," Cletus said. "Guess you won't be going to Bagley after all. Looks like that boy came to his senses finally."

"Why did he run off like that? Did he say where he was going?" Katie asked.

Theresa shook her head sadly.

"We've had enough excitement for one day. Let's go eat dinner. I made pie for dessert," Edna Petunia said proudly.

Theresa stared at the floor. "I'm not hungry," she mumbled.

"What's that, dear? My hearing isn't what it used to be," Edna Petunia explained.

"I'm going to bed," Theresa said flatly.

"You hurt your head?" Edna Petunia asked.

"I'm going to bed early," Theresa said in a louder tone.

"Your hair is curly? It looks straight, actually," Edna Petunia commented.

"I'm going to bed!" Theresa shouted.

Edna Petunia seemed taken aback. "I know you're upset about the little bastards and all, but you don't need to shout, dear! It's not polite."

Theresa shrugged and trudged toward the door.

"I'll put away a piece of pie for you for later," Edna Petunia called after her.

"Thanks," Theresa called listlessly as she walked up the staircase.

Edna Petunia turned to look at Katie and Cletus. "We have to make that girl smile again."

Cletus put his arm around Edna Petunia's shoulders. "We will, dear. We will." He bent Edna Petunia over and gave her a long, slow kiss.

Katie scurried into the kitchen to prepare for dinner. She was happy that her adoptive parents loved each other, but sometimes they could be too affectionate. She wasn't sure if they had even remembered she was in the room with them!

Meanwhile, Cody's mind raced almost as quickly as the horse he was riding. He had so much to do and such little time to do it. Cletus was right. The families would never just give a baby away to an unmarried couple without a home. And the longer the babies stayed with their new families, the harder it would be for them to let Cody and Theresa have them.

No, there wasn't much time at all, Cody realized as he pulled up in front of the boardinghouse.

"How are you?" Lucille asked as Cody ran up the stairs of her home. Cody barely heard her.

A few minutes later, Cody came downstairs carrying his steamer trunk and briefcase.

"I need to go. I'm sorry. I appreciate your hospitality," Cody told Lucille, handing her a sealed envelope.

Before she could say anything, Cody rushed out the door. Confused, Lucille walked over to her desk and picked up her letter opener. She slid the tool across the envelope and peered inside. Two weeks' worth of rent in shiny coins. Lucille was impressed. She had had boarders leave abruptly before, but they never left her extra money for the weeks they wouldn't be staying with her.

Outside, Cody loaded up his wagon with his possessions. He wasn't sure if he had enough time, but he had to try. It was the only chance he had to make Theresa happy.

Back at the Sanders' house, Theresa sat glumly on her bed, feeling sad and lonesome. She had trusted Cody. He had promised that he'd marry her and get the babies back. Instead, at the first hint of trouble, he had panicked and bolted. At least, that's what she assumed because he hadn't said anything at all.

Theresa berated herself. How could she have trusted him? After all, even though they had spent some time together over the past few weeks, he was still a stranger. Cletus's gut instincts not to trust the man had been right. He was a salesman. He had painted a pretty picture of a life that Theresa wanted, and just as she had been ready to commit to it, he left to go to the next town.

Theresa's eyes no longer shone with tears. She still missed the babies, but now, it was more than that. She was angry. She had placed her hope and trust in Cody, and now he was gone. Her plan was impossible without his support.

If Theresa tried to visit the Thomas or Sibley families, she'd be laughed out of the house for trying to get the babies back. She was an

unmarried woman who didn't even have a steady job anymore.

Theresa tried to think of a way that she could convince the families to let her care for the babies. At first, she couldn't think of any solutions. But then, as she settled down onto her bed and stared at the ceiling, she realized that both families might need a nanny. Maybe she could convince them to hire her to care for the children.

Theresa got excited as she envisioned the possibilities, but then she realized she'd only be able to work with one child at a time. That made her remember how traumatic it had been when Faith had left. Deep down, Theresa knew that separating the babies was a mistake. She needed to do everything in her power to correct it.

The following morning, Theresa woke up early and went into Katie's room. Theresa nudged Katie's arm to wake her.

Katie rubbed her eyes, blinking. "Theresa? What are you doing in here?"

"I can start working at the school again," Theresa said.

"Why?" Katie asked, still waking up.

"I don't have the babies to take care of anymore. I should get back to work," Theresa explained.

Katie sat up in bed and sighed. "All right, that's fine if that's what you want. But I liked working at the schoolhouse!"

"We can talk to Miss Carroll. Maybe there will be enough work for both of us," Theresa suggested. "We could take turns, even."

"Really?" Katie asked, excitement in her voice. "That would be wonderful!"

It made Theresa smile to see Katie so giddy. "Yes, that's fine."

Theresa left Katie's room to allow her sister to wash and dress for the day. Although working at the schoolhouse wasn't what she truly wanted, she knew it was a good, stable job, and she enjoyed the work. Still, she would much rather be at home tending to the twins than assisting a teacher in the schoolhouse.

Theresa imagined the twins growing up and going to school one day. It stung to think about them growing older. They would never even know she had existed.

Theresa's thoughts turned to Cody. She wondered what he was doing at that very moment. Could he be with another woman? Theresa had considered him good-looking and intelligent, but now she thought those characteristics were suspicious. He probably had a woman in every town.

Theresa dressed and went downstairs. Edna Petunia was frying an egg in the kitchen. "Good morning, dear."

"Good morning, Edna Petunia," Theresa said politely. "I'm going to work at the school today."

Edna Petunia nodded in approval. "That's good. It's about time you

spent some time outside of the house!”

Theresa ignored Edna Petunia’s comment and set the table. When the eggs were finished, Theresa helped Edna Petunia serve them onto plates.

As Cletus sat down, he looked at Theresa sternly. “I hope you’re not still thinking of taking those babies from their new homes. Are you?”

Theresa hesitated. She didn’t want to lie to her adoptive parents, but she also couldn’t tell them the entire truth. “I just want to get back to work and focus on that for a while.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear that,” Cletus said with a big grin. “Now, what’s for breakfast?”

Edna Petunia scooped eggs and bacon onto each family member’s plate as Theresa stared into the distance. She pictured the babies cooing and crying as they drank their infant food. She wondered what Cody was doing at that moment. Did he miss her at all?

## Nine

FOUR DAYS LATER, Cody Witherspoon rode back into Nowhere, determined to find Theresa and set things right. He rode straight to the Sanders' house, but when he arrived, something seemed different. As he climbed off his horse, he walked around. He knocked on the door, but there was no answer. He realized what was off—the wagon was gone. No one was home.

Cody waited on the front porch steps for one of the Sanders family members to return. He stretched out on his back and placed his hat over his head to pass the time. The past few days had drained him. But finally, things were starting to come together.

Cody looked at his watch. It had been nearly an hour. Where was everyone? His stomach growled, and he decided it was time to take a trip to Main Street.

Cody pulled up next to the mercantile, hitched his horse to the post, and went inside.

"Cody! Am I glad to see you!" Lewis cried. He stood and met Cody near the front of the store. "I thought you left town."

"I did, but I'm back—at least for a little while. Do you know where I can find Theresa? I went out to the house, but no one was home," Cody explained to his friend.

Lewis frowned. "Hm, that is strange. Cletus isn't usually home during the day, but Edna Petunia usually is. I'd guess you'd find Theresa at the schoolhouse."

"What would she be doing there?" Cody asked.

"She helps out the teacher, Miss Carroll, sometimes," Lewis told him.

Cody nodded. "Then that's where I'll go." His stomach rumbled again, this time loudly.

Lewis grinned. "Are you sure you don't want a snack first?"

Cody laughed. "You're right. I could use some sustenance."

Cody found a small tin of sausages and paid Lewis for the food and a bouquet of flowers. He ate the sausages and wiped his mouth with his handkerchief, making sure there were no crumbs. He wanted to make sure everything was perfect for Theresa.

When Cody arrived at the schoolhouse, he saw Katie outside, clapping erasers together.

"Cody!" Katie called out. "You're back?"



“Sh!” Cody put a finger to his lips. “I want to surprise Theresa. Is she inside?”

“Yes, she is,” Katie sang happily. “Oh, she’ll be tickled to see you!”

Cody smiled and took a deep breath. He gently opened the door to the schoolhouse and walked in. Seven children turned their heads and looked up at him, shocked at the sight of such a tall man in their little school building.

Theresa’s hands flew to her mouth. “What are you doing here?”

Miss Carroll put her hands on her hips. “Do you know this man?”

Cody looked at the teacher. “Miss Carroll, is it?”

Miss Carroll nodded.

“I apologize for interrupting your classroom. It won’t happen again. You see, I have an urgent matter to settle, and it couldn’t wait any longer,” Cody rambled.

Miss Carroll looked taken aback but stepped aside and gestured to Cody. “By all means, you have the floor.”

“Thank you, Miss Carroll.” Cody walked up next to Theresa. “Theresa Sanders, I’ve asked you this question before, and I will ask you again every day until you accept my proposal. Will you marry me?”

Theresa couldn’t believe it. She had thought Cody had left Nowhere to explore another town—and the women who lived there. Could this be real? Marrying Cody seemed like it was too good to be true, but there he was, standing in front of her. “Yes!”

Cody threw his arms around Theresa, and Miss Carroll and Katie led the students in a brief round of applause. “You’ve made me so happy,” Cody whispered in Theresa’s ear.

Theresa felt shivers running up and down her body. She couldn’t wait to be this man’s wife. As she thought about their future together, her heart sank. The babies had brought Cody into her life. Without them, would they be able to have a happy relationship?

Theresa pulled on Cody’s sleeve. “What about the twins?”

Cody nodded thoughtfully. “I have a few things to show you. Can you leave?”

Theresa looked at the clock. “It’s the middle of the school day.”

Cody chuckled. “Just this once?”

Theresa sighed. “Fine. But only because I just agreed to marry you.” Theresa walked over to Miss Carroll. “I have an urgent matter to attend to. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Miss Carroll nodded, eyeing Cody warily. “That’s fine. I’m sure Katie has things under control.”

“Goodbye, Miss Carroll. Goodbye, children!” Theresa called. The students waved goodbye dutifully as Cody and Theresa exited the small structure.

Outside, it was a beautiful, arid day.

"I have something for you," Cody told Theresa. "It's so good to see you. I was worried you wouldn't want to see me again."

"You were worried about that? I was anxious about the same thing!" Theresa exclaimed.

"I'm sorry I left so abruptly," Cody apologized. "I had some things to get in order."

"I thought you decided to move on," Theresa said truthfully.

Cody held her hands and brushed his lips against hers. Again, Theresa felt a shiver of anticipation, a sensation that was growing more and more familiar. "I'm so, so sorry, Theresa. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Of course," Theresa said happily. Now that Cody was at her side, she felt like anything was possible. Her heart wished for one more thing—well, actually, two more. But she knew she shouldn't get her hopes up again. Even though Cody was back, that didn't mean they had a chance to keep the babies.

Cody led her to his wagon and helped her inside. Before he climbed in himself, he lifted a small scroll of paper from inside the vehicle. As he stepped inside, he handed it to her. "This is for you."

Theresa unrolled the paper and stretched it out in front of her. It contained a pencil sketch of a beautiful Victorian home with a prominent turret on the side. "How beautiful," Theresa breathed. She didn't understand why Cody had given her a sketch of a home, but it was lovely.

Cody smiled as he began to drive toward their next destination. "It's a gift to you."

Theresa gaped at the drawing. "What do you mean?"

"That's our new home in Austin," Cody said proudly. "I've made all the arrangements."

As a young orphan, Theresa had never imagined living in such a grand and beautiful home. Now she had been doubly blessed. The Sanders had welcomed her into their large, comfortable home, and now Cody was giving her a dream house. Theresa couldn't believe how lucky she was. "I can't believe it," Theresa said truthfully. Theresa realized they were speeding away from Nowhere on the dusty roads. "Where are we going?"

"That house has six bedrooms," Cody explained. "We need to start filling them up."

Theresa clapped her hands together in glee. The man she loved understood her so well. Even though she would be happy with him no matter what the circumstance, the only way for her happiness to be complete would be to find the babies and reunite them.

Sure enough, after an agonizing journey to Bagley, Cody pulled up

in front of a small farmhouse on a large property. "This is where the Thomas family lives. I got their address from Lewis."

Theresa bounced her leg up and down, nervous for what would happen when they confronted the family. She remembered one of the points Cletus had brought up days earlier. "What if they ask if we're married?"

Cody frowned. "That's a good point. How does Sunday sound?"

Theresa giggled. She couldn't believe they were discussing marriage so casually. "That works fine for me!"

"Then it's settled." Cody winked at her as he got out of the wagon and came around the side to help her down.

Theresa followed behind Cody as he walked to the front door of the farmhouse and knocked on the door.

A middle-aged woman opened the door, shielding her eyes from the sun. "How can I help you? We weren't expecting anyone."

"I'm Cody Witherspoon, and this is Theresa Sanders. Theresa is the young woman who found Faith and Gabriel and has been caring for them for the past few weeks," Cody explained.

"I'm Belinda Thomas. Faith and Gabriel?" The woman scrunched up her face, confused.

Suddenly, they all heard a baby wail, and the woman rushed away. "I'll be right back!"

Theresa's heart beat faster as she recognized Faith's cries. The woman reappeared with Faith in her arms, rocking her gently back and forth. "What were you saying? This is little Amelia. Don't mind her. She's been fussy since we brought her home!" Despite the baby's misery, the woman seemed cheerful and optimistic.

"I've been calling her Faith," Theresa finally said. She wished she could sound more eloquent, but she was more emotional than she'd expected.

A look of realization flashed across the woman's face. "Oh, Theresa Sanders! Now I remember. Thank you for taking care of this little baby before she came to her new home. But what are you doing here now?"

"Mrs. Thomas, Faith—er, Amelia—is a twin. She was found with her brother, and we don't believe it's right that they've been split apart," Cody explained.

"I think one newborn is enough, don't you? I don't think I could handle two." Belinda chuckled.

"Mrs. Thomas, there's been a terrible mistake. Theresa and I are more than capable of raising these two babies. They shouldn't grow up separately, not knowing each other. We'd like to adopt the babies formally," Cody continued.

Belinda's jaw dropped open. "I think you'd best leave. I'm not giving you my baby!" Belinda's shouts had further upset Faith, and

now the little baby screamed even harder. Theresa longed to be able to reach out and soothe her, but Belinda had turned the baby away from them.

"Please, can we sit down and talk about this?" Cody asked. "We have the resources to support the babies, and Theresa has been caring for them for weeks now. Let's talk about what's best for the children."

"What's best is for you to leave right now before I go out and get my husband. He's working, but if he finds out that you came in here and threatened to take my baby, he won't be pleased," Belinda threatened.

Cody sighed. "If that's what you want."

"That's what I want," Belinda snapped. Her cheery disposition had changed into something far meaner.

Cody and Theresa shuffled outside quickly. From the front porch, they could still hear Faith's sobs. Theresa's heart felt like it was going to split into two.

Cody took Theresa's hand. "Let's not give up. We can still find Gabriel."

Theresa shook her head. "I don't have hope for much of anything after that."

"We have to keep trying," Cody insisted. He helped Theresa back into the wagon, and they set off for Nowhere.

During the drive, neither Cody nor Theresa spoke. Each was deep in thought, considering what had just happened. Cody wondered if Theresa would ever truly be happy if they couldn't get the babies back. Theresa wondered if Cody might leave again if the situation got worse. She didn't want that to happen.

When they pulled up to the Sibley's house, Theresa was afraid to get out of the wagon. What would happen if the Sibleys rejected their plan as well? Theresa didn't know if she could handle the disappointment. But when Cody offered her his hand, she accepted it, stepping down into the grass and dusting off her skirt.

Gerald Sibley answered the door. "How may I help you?"

Cody got right to the point. "We need to talk about the baby you've taken in to your home. We'd like to adopt him."

"But we're going to adopt him," Gerald said. He looked behind Cody at Theresa. "Oh, you're the Sanders girl! You just gave him away, and now you want him back?"

Theresa's lip trembled as she spoke. "Sir, with all due respect, I wanted to keep the babies the entire time. But now I actually have the means to do so."

Gerald looked confused. "I thought you were one of the single ones. There are so many of you Sanders girls, it's hard to keep track."

"We're getting married," Cody said, putting his arm around

Theresa. "And we've got a house lined up in Austin. There will be more than enough room for both babies."

Gerald sighed. "I don't know what you expected, showing up to my house like this, but you can at least come in and have a cup of coffee." He stood back and ushered them into the house.

Gerald led the way to a small parlor. Veronica came into the room, holding a crying Gabriel. Even though it had only been a few days since she'd last seen him, he seemed like he had grown. Theresa wished she could reach out and comfort him, but Veronica cradled him protectively across the room.

"These two want to take little Gerald away," Gerald told his wife.

"What? Why?" Veronica was startled.

"Mr. and Mrs. Sibley, we appreciate that you're willing to take Gabriel—er, the baby—in. At first, my family thought that was the right thing to do. But now I'm getting married, and my future husband and I have a home in Austin. We'll be able to reunite the baby with his twin sister. We think that's best for him," Theresa said, the words rushing out of her mouth. Her eyes pleaded with Veronica. Even though Theresa wasn't technically a mother, she felt like one. Veronica had to understand.

But Veronica looked down at the floor.

Gerald put a hand comfortingly on his wife's shoulder. "I'm afraid that won't be possible. We're adopting Gerald."

"Is there any chance you could reconsider?" Cody asked.

Gerald shook his head. "No. We appreciate you stopping by. You're welcome to come here if you'd like to see the boy."

Veronica nodded. "It was a very selfless thing that you did, Theresa, taking care of the babies before they found permanent homes. I can imagine this is difficult for you. Come visit any time."

Theresa nodded, fighting back a fresh wave of tears. "Thank you."

"We should go now," Cody said, standing up and taking Theresa's arm in his. "Thank you for your time."

Gerald walked them to the door. "I'm sorry we couldn't give you the answer you hoped for. I wish you two all the best."

Cody nodded and shook the man's hand. He and Theresa headed outside and got back into the wagon.

Cody sighed as he sat down. "That wasn't how I expected things to go."

"Me neither," Theresa admitted.

"I'm sorry." Cody set his hand on top of Theresa's.

Even in her sorrow, Theresa loved the feeling of Cody's hand resting on her own. Suddenly, she couldn't wait to be married to him. She felt foolish for asking, but the words spilled out. "Do you still want to marry me?"

Cody's mouth dropped open. "Of course, Theresa! You're the love of my life. The only thing I am certain about. Of course I want to marry you."

Theresa felt a wave of relief wash over her. "When?"

Cody considered this. "How about now?"

Theresa blushed. "Right now?"

"Why not?" Cody countered. "We can get married and go to Austin as soon as possible. If we can't have the babies back, maybe we can start making a few of our own."

Theresa blushed and giggled at the thought. "I'd like that."

Cody flicked the reins, and they took off.

"Where are we going?" Theresa asked.

"I believe we need a reverend to get married," Cody explained. "And as luck would have it, I happen to know one."

A little while later, they pulled up in front of Sarah Jane and Micah's house, which was attached to the town church. Cody got out and helped Theresa down.

Theresa couldn't believe that she was going to get married. She had thought it would never happen, and now it was not only happening, but it was happening quickly.

Sarah Jane answered the door, looking surprised to see Theresa and Cody. "Hello! I wasn't expecting to see you two."

"Is your husband around? We have a favor to ask him . . ." Cody began.

Sarah Jane looked from Cody to Theresa a few times suspiciously. "I'll go find him."

A few moments later, Sarah Jane returned with Micah. "Why don't you all come in and have a seat?" Micah suggested.

Cody felt at ease immediately. He was lucky to know a man as calming and compassionate as Micah was. He quickly explained their predicament.

"Oh, Theresa, I can't believe it. I'm so happy for you!" Sarah Jane exclaimed. "Don't you want a little more time, so you can plan out a dress and flowers and things like that?"

Theresa shook her head. "I've never been interested in those things. All that matters is that I'm marrying Cody."

Cody beamed at his bride-to-be. There weren't many women like her in the world, and he felt lucky to have found one.

Sarah Jane frowned. "Isn't Edna Petunia going to be upset if she's not here?"

Micah sighed. "She was just starting to forgive me . . ."

"Forgive you?" Cody asked, puzzled.

Micah looked sheepish. "I've performed more than a few spur-of-the-moment weddings for Sarah Jane's sisters. Edna Petunia is never

very happy with my actions.”

Theresa considered this. “Well, we could go back to the house and try to do a ceremony there. But I like the idea of a small and simple service, just the two of us. And the two of you, of course.”

“Whatever you’d like. I’m going to finish fixing dinner. You let us know what you decide,” Sarah Jane said bossily. Of all Theresa’s sisters, Sarah Jane was one of the most likely to take charge.

Micah nodded. “I’ll be in my study. Let me know if you need anything.”

Cody and Theresa conferred quietly. “I can’t wait to marry you. I don’t care if we get married here or at the Sanders’ house,” Cody told her.

“I don’t care where we get married either,” Theresa said. “I am feeling guilty that we’ll be leaving soon for Austin and I won’t see my family as much as they’re used to. Maybe we should do the wedding at the house.”

“That’s a good point,” Cody said.

A few minutes later, Theresa found Micah and Sarah Jane and told them their decision.

Sarah Jane rounded up the children and loaded them into the wagon. Cody and Theresa took the lead in their wagon. Sarah Jane and Micah followed closely behind.

When they arrived at the Sanders’ house, Edna Petunia opened the door. “I wasn’t expecting such a big group! I don’t have enough to feed you all.”

“Actually, you do,” Sarah Jane said. She pulled a large stockpot out of the back of the wagon. “I started making dinner. We can combine this with whatever you were making.”

Edna Petunia cackled. “I still don’t understand why you all are here, but I can’t complain!”

“We have an announcement,” Theresa said, smiling at Cody.

“Oh, no.” Edna Petunia took a gulp from her hip flask. “Is there going to be another baby around here in a few months? I don’t know if my heart can take it . . .”

“Is that why you’re in such a rush—” Sarah Jane began.

Theresa blushed. “No, that’s not it at all!” She thought they both knew that she wouldn’t engage in premarital relations with anyone. Although her feelings for Cody were strong, she just wasn’t capable of taking that risk. As she thought about it, she realized that they would be married and soon it would no longer be an issue at all. Theresa giggled.

Cody looked at his fiancée with amusement. He didn’t know what she was thinking about, but he couldn’t wait to make her his wife. “Do you want to tell them?”

Theresa nodded excitedly. "Where's Cletus? I want him to be here, too. And Katie."

Edna Petunia led the rowdy group into the formal parlor. "Everyone, Theresa says she has an announcement." She watched as Cletus's eyes grow big. "No, it's not that, dear. Don't worry."

Cody grabbed Theresa's hand, and Theresa took a deep breath. "Cody and I are getting married. Tonight."

Cletus, Edna Petunia, and Katie began cheering. Cletus leapt out of his chair to pump Cody's hand. "Congratulations, son. And if you do anything to harm a hair on her head, you'll have me to deal with," he said in a disarming tone.

Cody nodded. "Understood, sir. It's my job now to make her the happiest woman in the world."

Theresa smiled as she heard this. She knew Cody would do everything in his power to make sure she was happy, but at the moment, she still felt lingering sadness over everything that had happened with the babies. But maybe Cody was right—in time, they'd have their own children, and that would be wonderful. She pictured them with Cody's hair and complexion but her eyes, or vice versa. She couldn't wait to bear his children and build a life with him.

She was even excited about Austin. The home Cody had arranged to purchase was absolutely stunning, everything she'd always dreamed of as a girl. And hopefully her sisters and their families could visit them from time to time. She'd miss everyone terribly, of course, but she also felt excitement about moving to a new city and having a fresh start with Cody.

Suddenly, Theresa realized they hadn't told her family about Austin. She cleared her throat. "There's another thing we need to tell you. We're moving to Austin."

The room quieted immediately, the jubilation turning to fear, concern, and disappointment. "Austin? Why would you want to do a thing like that?" Edna Petunia scoffed.

"Cody's been given a wonderful opportunity," Theresa began.

"I've been promoted to Vice President of my company," Cody explained quietly.

"And we'll be living in a beautiful home." Theresa pulled the scroll out of her pocket and laid it flat on the coffee table. Everyone crowded around to look at it.

"It's beautiful!" Katie cried.

"It's very nice," Sarah Jane admitted. "But Austin is far. We'll barely ever see each other."

Theresa sighed. "I know it's a lot to digest. But we're very happy about this. After everything that happened with the babies, it feels like it's time to move on."



Cletus nodded sagely. "I'm glad to hear that you've given that up."

"It's not that we've given it up. We tried. But the families that have the babies didn't want to give them back," Theresa confessed. Thinking about it made her tear up again.

"Theresa, don't look so sad. Today should be a happy day," Katie instructed. "Come with me, and I'll fix your hair!"

Theresa allowed Katie to lead her by the hand upstairs, where Katie began to braid Theresa's hair.

Downstairs in the formal parlor, Sarah Jane bossed her children around, instructing them to move the furniture to prepare for a wedding.

"I'll never get everything back where it was!" Edna Petunia complained.

"We need space for a wedding," Sarah Jane protested.

Cletus grinned. "Another wedding in the family. I'm not sure if you had anything to do with convincing them to have it here, but I sure do appreciate it, son," Cletus told Micah.

Micah smiled in relief. "Actually, it was Sarah Jane's idea."

"In any case, I'm glad that they'll be getting married here. Don't tell anyone, but I do have a soft spot for these orphans, Micah." Cletus laughed.

Micah smiled. As a father himself, he knew what Cletus meant.

Sarah Jane frowned at the two men. "What are you two doing, just standing around? We have a wedding to plan!"

Less than an hour later, Cletus walked the bride down the makeshift aisle Sarah Jane and the children had created in the parlor. Theresa wore a white dress she had borrowed from Katie, and Katie had even sprinkled some flowers throughout Theresa's braids.

In his customary suit and tie, Cody looked as dapper as ever. As Cletus and Theresa advanced toward him, Cody reflected upon his luck to have found a woman as beautiful and gracious as Theresa.

Theresa looked at her family members as she walked toward Cody. It all felt so surreal. Soon, she'd start a new life in Austin, just as she'd started a new life in Nowhere all those years ago. She clutched at the bouquet of flowers Cody had given her hours earlier as part of his proposal. She couldn't believe that it had only been that morning that he had surprised her at the schoolhouse.

As Theresa and Cletus approached Cody, Cletus kissed Theresa on the cheek. "You're a good girl, Theresa, and your mother and I love you very much."

Theresa choked up hearing her adoptive father's kind and generous words. Edna Petunia and Cletus had done so much for her. She would be forever grateful to them.

Cody bent down and whispered in Theresa's ear. "You look

absolutely stunning. And while I love the way you look in that dress, I'm also curious—"

Micah cleared his throat, and Cody straightened, winking mischievously at Theresa. Theresa blushed. Micah began the ceremony. "We are gathered here to observe as Cody Witherspoon and Theresa Sanders become man and wife. This is a wondrous, blessed occasion and I feel fortunate to bear witness. Please, join me in prayer."

Theresa found it hard to concentrate on portions of the service because of how excited she was. There was a lot she didn't know about being married, and she couldn't wait to experience it all with Cody. She sighed, staring at him dreamily. He really was a handsome man, but it was about so much more than that. He was loving and kind. The way he had treated the babies was gentler than anything she'd ever seen before. She knew he cared for them just as much as she did.

Theresa felt a pang as she thought of the babies, but she tried to focus on the positives. Her time would come. She felt sure of it.

"If any man or woman knows of any reason why this couple should not be wed—" Micah's words were interrupted by a loud banging on the door.

Everyone looked around in confusion, stunned.

"Don't just stand there staring at each other! Is someone going to get the door?" Edna Petunia yelled.

Katie jumped to her feet and sped to the door.

Theresa looked at Cody nervously. Suddenly, she felt nervous. Were they rushing their marriage? Did she really know Cody well enough to be married to him? She wondered about who was at the door. She hoped it wasn't someone trying to break up the wedding. After the difficult day they'd had, Theresa didn't know if she would be able to handle yet another disappointment.

Katie returned to the room beaming. "I think you're going to want to see who's at the door," Katie told Theresa and Cody.

Perplexed, the bride and groom followed Katie toward the entrance.

Outside, Theresa saw a jumble of people on the porch and two wagons parked outside. She recognized Veronica Sibley immediately.

"Sweetheart, we got to thinking about what you said, and you were right. This baby deserves two young, loving parents who can give him the best possible chance in this life," Veronica said. She handed the baby to Theresa.

Gerald Sibley shook Cody's hand solemnly.

Theresa was overwhelmed. "Thank you, Veronica," she whispered. Having Gabriel back in her arms made Theresa feel happier than she

thought possible. Her heart felt full and content.

Veronica moved out of the way, and Belinda Thomas stepped forward. "When we heard that the Sibleys were going to let you adopt their baby, we thought about what you talked about when you were here. What's best for the babies. And we truly believe the best thing for this child is to be with her twin."

Theresa gasped. She couldn't believe that both Veronica and Belinda had made such a difficult and generous decision. She knew they had made the right choice, and she felt honored that they'd chosen her to take care of the twins.

Belinda held Faith out to her, and Theresa readjusted so she could cradle Faith in one arm and Gabriel in the other.

Belinda looked at Theresa's white dress and the flowers in her hair. "Oh, my. Have we interrupted something?"

"It's not an interruption. I really appreciate everything you and your families have done," Theresa told Belinda and Veronica. "But, now that you mention it, we are in the middle of a wedding ceremony. Would you like to join us?"

Belinda grinned. "Of course!"

Veronica looked at Gerald, who was deep in conversation with Cody. "Gerald! The man's getting married. We need to let him get back to his bride!"

Gerald looked up, startled.

From inside the house, Edna Petunia shouted. "What's going on out there?"

Theresa laughed. "Follow me, everyone." She led the group into the house, and Micah resumed the ceremony, barely batting an eye at the new guests. "A little help, please?" Theresa gestured to Cody, indicating that her hands were full.

Cody rushed forward and scooped Faith from Theresa's arms. With Theresa holding Gabriel and Cody holding Faith, Micah officially declared them husband and wife.

Afterward, as everyone celebrated and congratulated the newlyweds, Cody pulled Theresa aside.

"How badly do you want to go to Austin?" Cody asked.

Theresa frowned. "It sounds exciting, like a fresh start, but it would also be difficult to be away from family. Especially with these two." She was feeding Faith while Gabriel sat in his bassinet until it was his turn.

"Gerald Sibley offered me a job at the Nowhere bank," Cody said. "He's got a plot of land we could build our dream house on. I know it wouldn't be the house in Austin, but we could make it into our own."

Theresa gasped. "But what about your job?"

"Mr. Clarkson will understand. I've worked with him for a long

time, and he's been good to me, but he'll understand that I have my family to think about now. I think it will be wonderful for the children to be raised in this environment instead of the city, where people can be cruel and greedy. The more I think about it, the more I think that I was meant to end up in Nowhere," Cody explained. "With you."

Theresa broke out into a wide smile. "Cody Witherspoon, I think you're absolutely right." Cody kissed her deeply on the lips, and the crowd around them erupted again in cheers. It was a wonderful ending to a wonderful night.

## Epilogue

FIVE MONTHS LATER, Theresa fidgeted nervously on the table as Dr. Iris Harvey examined her.

Dr. Iris sat up straight and smiled. "Tell me again what's concerning you."

Cody squeezed Theresa's hand. She wasn't one to worry, which was what made him concerned. She had been complaining for weeks.

"By my count, I should be only four months along. But I'm as big as a house!" Theresa lamented. "I'm exhausted all the time and growing larger by the day."

"I'm sorry. I know that sounds uncomfortable, but I can confirm you're very healthy," Dr. Iris smiled.

"But none of my sisters were this large at this point in their pregnancies. Unless you count Ruby and Opal, but that was different, because they were having—" Theresa sat up on the table and looked at Cody in shock.

Cody was confused. "What is it?"

Theresa and Dr. Iris spoke at the same time. "Twins."

"What? We're having twins? More twins?" Cody babbled.

Theresa was in disbelief. "How is that possible?"

Dr. Iris shrugged. "Twins can be more common than you might imagine. Both babies seem perfectly healthy. But you will be a little bigger than your sisters who only had one baby at a time. That's quite normal."

Theresa laughed. "I don't know whether I'm more scared or excited. I feel like we just got the hang of having one set of twins. I can't imagine what two will be like!"

Dr. Iris smiled at her patient and her family. "I'll give you some privacy and will be outside if you have any questions." She left the exam room.

Cody's eyes grew large. "I can't imagine our bills at the mercantile." He recovered quickly. "It's a good thing we know someone who works there." He bent down and kissed Theresa's forehead. "I'm only teasing, darling. I'm thrilled. All I've wanted since the moment I met you was to raise a family with you. And now we're growing by the day."

"I just hope I don't grow so large I can't fit through the door," Theresa joked. "In all seriousness, I'm very happy, too. I love you."

Theresa couldn't believe how much her life had changed in a few short months. Although the future would be challenging and exciting at the same time, there was one point she was absolutely certain of—Cody Witherspoon was the man she was meant to be with, and together, they would build a beautiful family and life. She thanked her lucky stars for all of her blessings. She was exactly where she was destined to be.

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